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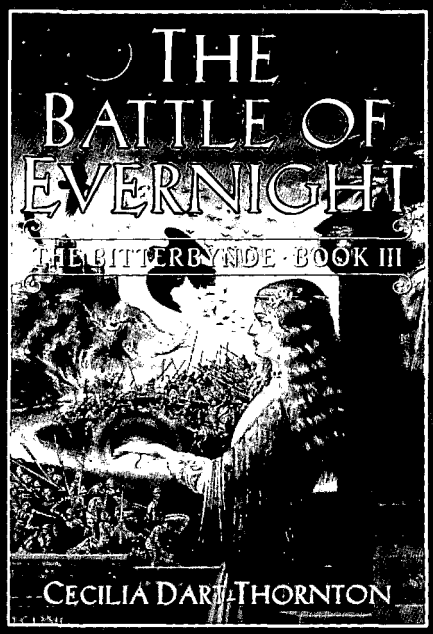

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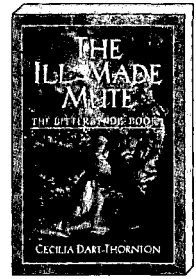

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

FOR FORTY years now, our single-author issues have followed the basic structure of featuring a short novel or two stories by the writer in question, accompanied by a biographical essay and a bibliography of the author's work. You might say this issue is backwards.

You see, it originated when Daniel Dern's story landed on my desk. That's funny, I thought; it's the second story I've read now featuring Barry Malzberg as a character. (The first was Tony Daniel's story "Barry Malzberg Drives a Black Cadillac," which was in the Winter 2001 issue of *Talebones* magazine.) Then John Kessel's story showed up and I figured something was afoot.

So I contacted Barry about writing that essay he'd been promising to write, his memoir of working for the Scott Meredith Agency as one of the fee readers. He came up with the terrific piece you'll soon see, a wonderful look into one of science fiction's shadowy corners, and a compelling look at the life of the writer as well.

And thus we have a "backwards" issue in which the celebrated author contributes the nonfiction while the fiction celebrates the author. Hey, it works for me — I hope you'll say the same.

After our last single-author issue (the Kate Wilhelm issue, Sept. 2001), several readers commented that it's no longer necessary to provide a bibliography for the author in question — there are plenty of references available nowadays for anyone who wants that information. I agreed with them, especially after I punched "Barry N. Malzberg" into the Google search engine and found half a dozen bibliographies online, including a list of Barry Malzberg stories published in Swedish. (All five of them turn out to be translations that appeared in our Swedish counterpart, *Jules Verne-Magasinet*, published by Sam J. Lundwall.)

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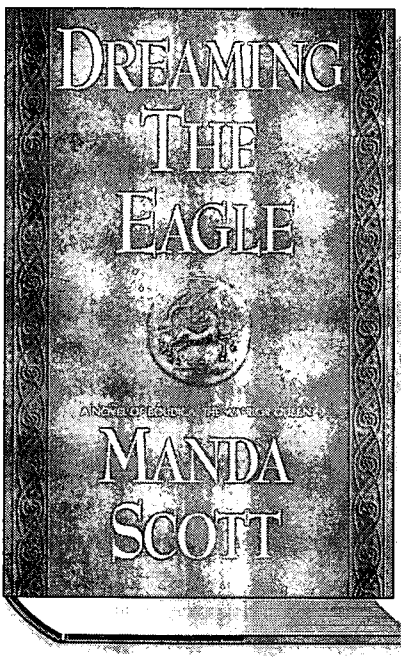

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Barry Malzberg's bibliography needs several Web pages just to capture the breadth of his writing. His work ranges across genres (men's adventure, mystery, suspense), through several pen names (Mike Barry, Mel Johnson, K. M. O'Donnell), and often in collaborations (with Kathe Koja, Carter Scholz, and many others), but wherever it goes, it's always marked by a distinctively sharp-edged waterfall of prose that hurtles you along, often to leave you dashed upon the rocks below, wiser and better for the experience.

Indeed, it's the fact that Mr. Malzberg's fiction isn't afraid to crash against those rocks that puts off some readers. A reader quickly figures out that the saccharine, Disney-esque sweetness that characterizes so much American art has no place in his work. (Nor does it do much for me, as you've probably noticed from reading the magazine; I almost used "contaminates" instead of "characterizes" in the previous sentence.) One colleague commented to me on hearing of the special Malzberg issue, "Well, if I were you, I'd fill the rest of the issue with happy upbeat stories."

But don't let this talk of gloom and downers turn you away from reading the fiction — to miss the fiction would be to miss out on much irony, wit, and insight. One of the aforementioned Malzberg Web sites reprints this comment Theodore Sturgeon made in a review of Malzberg's work: "Dammit, how can a man be so much fun and have so little joy?"

A partial answer to Mr. Sturgeon's rhetorical question is to note that Barry Malzberg's fiction follows in the tradition of Jewish literature such as that of Sholom Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Joy is not an issue. Some laughter, some tears, but turning joy into the objective is like asking a rabbi if there's a heaven. The words are in the vocabulary, but it's not the right question to ask.

For this issue I elected to reprint two short-shorts that struck me as being pure hits of Malzberg: humor and pain rolled together in a dough of speculation and cooked at high heat. Neither of them, however, includes a common Malzberg ingredient, the recursive element. I think no other writer has written so much or so well about the life of the science fiction writer and the sf community. That community and those writers have not always enjoyed these portraits, but the writer's obligation is to be true to the material, and Barry Malzberg is that.

My favorite anecdote about

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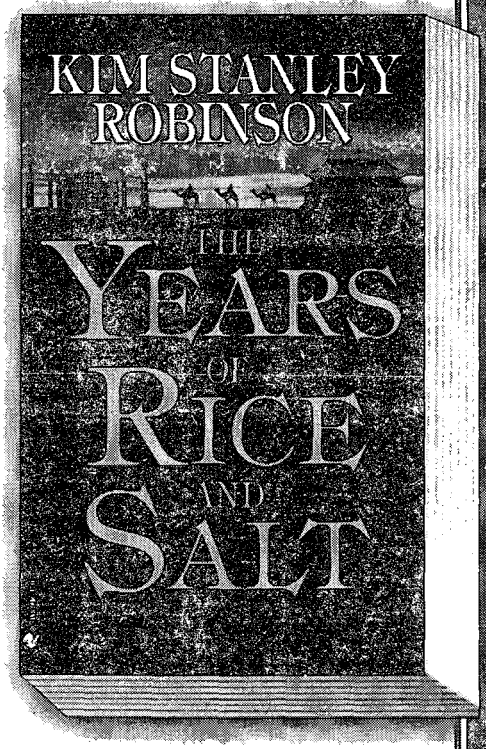

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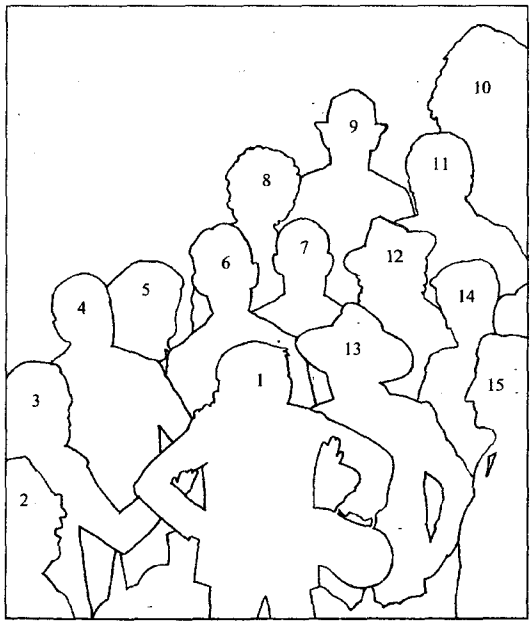
Barry comes from his 1991 Guest of Honor appearance at Readercon, a small science fiction convention in Massachussetts. The convention holds a bad prose contest named after Kirk Poland, the pseudonym employed by the protagonist of Barry's 1973 novel *Herovit's World* for writing sci-fi novels. In his Guest of Honor speech Barry was beaming, simply beaming, as he said, "I cannot tell you what an honor it is to be here where bad prose is being read and *not* being given the Hugo Award or the Nebula."

I grow to appreciate Barry Malzberg's work more each year and I'm very happy to celebrate it with this issue. I hope you'll appreciate it too.

— GVG



In case you're puzzling over the cover illustration, here's the guide to who's who:

1. Barry Malzberg
2. Isaac Asimov
3. Robert Silverberg
4. Robert A. Heinlein
5. Judith Merril
6. Aldous Huxley
7. William Faulkner
8. Kurt Vonnegut
9. Damon Runyon
10. Damon Knight
11. Poul Anderson
12. Walt Whitman
13. Ernest Hemingway
14. John Updike
15. George Orwell

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Barry Malzberg first introduced us to writer's heaven in our May 1978 issue with "Big Ernie, the Royal Russian, and the Big Trapdoor." He followed up with "Ring, The Brass Ring, the Russian and I" (Aug. 1978), "The Annual Once a Year Bash" (March 1979), and "Of Ladies Night Out and Otherwise" (published in The Man Who Loved the Midnight Lady*). John Kessel felt the time to return has come.*

Of New Arrivals, Many Johns, and the Music of the Spheres

By John Kessel

[This story takes place in the future, when everyone in it is dead. The fact that several of the dead people I mention here are still alive today should not be taken as expressing any preferences on my part. Quite the contrary.]

NOT A LITTLE WATER HAS flowed under the bridge since last I told you about events in Writer's Heaven. This is not because nothing has happened in the interim (though it is certainly true that all the things that have happened fall within a certain narrow range), but rather that the final import of all these happenings has not effected any fundamental difference between then and now. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose,* as those of the French persuasion tell us.

This is not to imply that the passing show is without its moments of interest, pathos, and instruction. Let me give you a for instance.

I am working on my third gin of the evening when the night bus comes through. It is maybe eleven P.M. heaven time (for the convenience of the inhabitants, our clock is synchronized to GMT). Writer's Heaven is situated between Painter's Heaven and Musician's Heaven, in the creative

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quarter, and though it is not unheard of for residents of one of the other quarters to show up in ours (habits being more or less the same, and some shades even having known each other in life) for the most part the writers stick to themselves, etc. I look up from the table where I am sitting, near the front window, and see the big Greyhound pull to a stop. The driver, Bill the Cherub, despite his name and to the consternation of some of the veterans in Painter's Heaven, is a lanky, dour sort of guy. He opens the bus door.

"Writer's Heaven," he announces, and climbs down and opens the luggage compartment. He pulls out a couple of suitcases while two passengers step down from the bus. One of them is a well-groomed dame in her middle years, wearing too much makeup. She takes a look around, spots the lighted sign for the hotel across the street, and sets off for the entrance without a word, leaving Bill to carry her bag along after her.

The other passenger is a tall fellow in a shapeless blue suit and no tie. He's balding, and the graying hair he's got could use the ministrations of a good barber. Dark eyebrows, not much chin, stoop shouldered, he looks like a guy who's been spending a lot of time indoors, like a bookkeeper (which, truth to tell, a lot of us in the profession could be mistaken for, except for posers like Big Ernie). Only one thing wrong with this picture: He is carrying a violin case.

The guy squints up at the sign over the door of the bar. The green neon makes his face look sickly, though that might just be the lingering effects of whatever illness brought him here, assuming it was illness and not something more sudden. Then he looks right at me through the window. I raise my glass to him, and that seems to settle it: he tucks the violin under his arm, picks up his suitcase, and comes in the front door.

"Welcome," I say to him. I was known to be irascible in my later years, but it's little remembered how I had a convivial side. To tell the truth, not much at all is remembered about me.

"Thanks," he says and stands there looking around. It's an awkward moment. I can see that he's trying to assess what he's up against.

Chuck the Seraph's has changed over the last thirty years. The management has had to cater to a slightly different clientele than in the old days. Many more ladies (though the newer ones object to that designation). A menu sporting words like *avocados* and *arugula*. Some of

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these new guys like Paddy and Rod made their names in TV and the movies, and have a slightly warped understanding of what constitutes the necessities. So now the bar has videogames and plush red velour bar stools with brass trimmings, a brick inglenook fireplace with a godawful beaten brass bas-relief hanging above it, a big rack of wineglasses, TVs mounted in corners all around the room, lots of bric-a-brac like fishnets and anchors and crab cages and phony tin signs for turn-of-the-last-century root beer and athlete's foot ointment. The TVs are tuned to cable stations with the sound turned down, and if you ask him nice, the bartender Louis will have mercy on your soul and in deference to the old-timers turn them off completely. For a while. The management is reasonable, and after all, this is supposed to be *writer's* heaven.

"I'm Barry," the newcomer says. "Can you stand me to a drink? I don't have any cash."

"Drinks are always and everywhere on the house," I tell him, guiding him over to the bar. "Another homewrecker for me," I tell Louie, "and my friend will have...?"

" — a scotch," says Barry.

Most of the writers who are in the bar (as usual, a significant contingent are in the brothel next door), busy throwing them down, don't even notice that a new guy has come in. Scott, who has never learned to hold his liquor, is passed out in one of the booths. Big Ernie, in his safari vest and jodhpurs, is reminiscing with John Dos about some ski outing in the French Alps.

Over in the Latin Corner, Jorge and Julio are playing a word game. Barry takes his scotch, saunters over, and sits himself down.

"Cama," says Jorge.

"Casa," says Julio.

"Casaba," says Barry.

The two of them look at him as if he has fallen off the back of a truck, then give him the cold shoulder.

Barry turns his watery eyes elsewhere, spots the Royal Russian sipping an aperitif by himself. The Russian is not much of a socializer and keeps an exile's distance, but Barry does not know that. He goes over and tries to strike up a conversation. "I was a great admirer of yours, sir."

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"And you are...?"

"Barry."

"You are a writer?"

"Over eight million words of published fiction."

The Russian smiles, thin as spring ice. "You counted the words?"

"Someone had to. That's how I was paid."

Dashiell leans over. "Wrote for the pulps, did you? Lots of us did. We got Charles here, and Big Jim, and Raymond — though Ray has pretensions."

Big Ernie stops talking to John Dos, and takes a good hard look at the new guy.

"*Who* are you?"

"Barry," the newcomer says.

"New Yorker, right?" says John C. John C. has his own problems with the bottle, which lends him no particular distinction around here, and he bats from both sides of the plate, if you get my drift, but these new guys don't seem to care about that as much, and besides, Barry is not the kind who is likely to inspire lust.

"New Jersey," says Barry morosely. "Teaneck."

The poor bastard. Should have known enough to keep his mouth shut. Immediately starts up a chorus of mockery about Jersey, the swamps, the mob, etc. etc. The only sympathy Barry gets is from Will the poet, sort of a middle-class type, and old Walt the other poet, whose New York credentials go back so far that nobody dares gig him for ending up in Camden.

"That ain't heat you're packing, is it, soldier?" says John O'H, gesturing at the case.

"No."

"Then you got off the bus too soon," says John G. "Musicians are the *next* stop."

"I'm a writer, not a musician."

"A pulp writer," says John U. We are rotten with Johns here in Writer's Heaven. "What did you write?"

"I wrote all kinds of books. *You* might have liked *Confessions of Westchester County*. It was about suburban New Yorkers and their sex lives. Like *Couples*."

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"*Confessions of Westchester County*?" says Bernard. "I read that. That was a porn book."

"I sold it as pornography."

"Was all your work porn?"

"My most famous book was about an astronaut having a nervous breakdown."

"Never heard of it."

"Ah — It was published as Science Fiction."

"Science fiction," murmurs the Royal Russian. The briefest of smiles twitches his lips.

"I see," says Edmund W. Edmund was more of a critic than a fiction writer, and he seldom lets a judgment go unexpressed.

"What do you see?"

Edmund smiles just like the Russian (they were once the best of friends, before they became the best of enemies). "Nothing. I see not one damned thing. Enjoy your drink, Barry."

"Wait a minute," Barry said. "I know that don't-trouble-me-with-trash look." He points at George O. "What about him? He wrote science fiction."

"No, afraid not, comrade," says George. "Political satire."

Barry looks around, locates tall Aldous. "And you?"

"Anti-utopia."

A little desperate now, he fingers Kurt. "You — you even published in the science fiction magazines. Didn't you?"

"Perhaps. But I wasn't a sci-fi writer."

"Hypocrite! How can you say that? My stories were as serious as yours. Not only that — I wrote about things that the rest of you ignored. I wrote about the realities of technology. The engines of the night, grinding away. Your lives were being transformed by them — but all of you wrote as if the television, the computer, the birth control pill didn't exist. You — " He points at John U. "And you." John C.

"The problem," says John U., "was when you folks addressed those issues, you didn't address them in human terms. You worked within juvenile formulas that prevented you from doing the real work of fiction."

"Formulas! What were your stories about coupling and uncoupling in suburbia but a formula? Don't speak to me of formulas!"

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"Barry...Barry...yes!" John C. says. "I remember — I read one of your books. I was guesting at a house on the Cape one summer, and I found it on the bookshelf. It read well enough. Had the feel of one of those New York Jewish books — Roth, Malamud."

Barry grasps at the straw of vindication. "You see?"

But as quick as he offers succor, John C. pulls it back. "So why didn't you publish with a real publisher? The fact that you never did suggests some deficiency. Unless you believe there was some vast conspiracy against you."

"There might as well have been. Was there a conspiracy against Langston Hughes? Kate Chopin?"

"There's no conspiracy," says Edmund. "A hundred different cut-throat editors prowl the dives of Manhattan looking for someone they can hitch their careers to, and you can't find one to bet on you? Eight million words? How can there be any quality when you're grinding out books like sausage?"

Barry looks stung. He draws his head turtlelike back into his shoulders. He rallies. "What about Oates? She wrote as much as I did."

"Ah, dear Joyce. A fragile thing. We don't take responsibility for her. She's a lady writer."

"All right, then, Faulkner — how many words did he churn out?"

A gray-haired man raises his head. "Don't rightly know. I was pretty likkered up most of the time."

"Come now, Barry. Although we have the highest respect for Bill's career — he earned that respect through blood and toil — even in his case we don't speak well of *all* of those words."

"Well, I don't speak well of all of my words, either," Barry says. "So why must I be responsible for every word, when Faulkner gets a pass, and Oates gets a pass, and John U. — you, for god's sake! — how many words did you produce? And you get a pass. My debilities are carefully marked down against my name. Your mistakes are forgotten and forgiven."

At this juncture I begin to tip to the possibility that Barry's first night in Writer's Heaven may not end well. In fact, I would lay you eight to five against. Yet as a journalist and one who has himself all too often felt the sting of undue neglect, I cannot help but put in a word. "The man has a point, gentlemen. He has a point."

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"An argumentative sleight of hand," says Edmund, who did not deign to notice me when we were alive, even when we chased the same women, and whose vision has not improved now that we are both dead. "It reeks of desperation." He turns to Barry, and delivers the clincher. "If we let you in, whom shall we leave out?"

Barry looks like a bettor with money on the winning pony who on the way to the window sees a protest being filed. "But this is supposed to be heaven. How can you leave *anyone* out?"

"Ahh — you prove yourself a utopian after all. It can't be heaven *unless* you leave someone out."

Barry's jaw clenches. He protests. He spills his drink. The discussion turns pugilistic and he takes a swing at Edmund, missing badly. Before you can say *New York Review of Books*, John O'H. and Red grab Barry by his collar and the seat of his pants and give him the bum's rush. Since I am between them and the entrance, I duck out of the way and they hurtle past me, kick open the door, and toss him into the street. Barry lands on his knees and elbows, skids a yard or more, rolls over, and lies there. A couple of other patrons throw his suitcase and violin out after him. John and Red dust off their hands and come back inside for another round.

Welcome to Writer's Heaven. Watching him sprawled there, I feel a surge of pity, and despite the fact that no part of this contretemps may be counted as either my business or my responsibility, I set down my gin and exit the bar.

Barry is sitting up, examining a tear in the knee of his trousers and the bleeding kneecap it exposes. He looks up at me. Neither of us says anything. He has an open face, for a homely guy, a kind of eagerness, even adolescence, beneath the dissolution. This is a guy, his face tells me, who has been disappointed a lot, but who, though he might not admit to it, hides inside his stoop-shouldered self a sliver of idealism.

I take the gentleman by his forearm and help him to his feet. He tugs his jacket straight, brushes off his sleeves. "You don't want anything to do with me."

"Horses for courses. Come with me," I say, and head off down the street.

Barry shrugs his shoulders and follows me past the hotel, the bordello, and the convenience store where, behind the counter under the fluorescents,

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Lenny the Seraph is studying a copy of *Hustler*, the stub of a Chesterfield dangling from his lip, his head wreathed in a halo of cigarette smoke. The smile that plays across his lips makes him look a little like an angel.

Barry cradles the violin case under his arm. "What *is* in there?" I ask. "Maybe you *are* packing heat?"

"Not hardly."

"I bet you wrote mysteries, too, right?"

"A couple."

"So, maybe there's a gat in there."

"It's a violin."

"Well, who am I to question a musician?"

"Not a musician. A writer."

A quarter of a mile down the strip I guide Barry into Verne's, which even at this hour is doing business. Not as many women as in Chuck's, but the booze is flowing and the conversations buzz. Nobody takes any notice of us while I order a martini, easy on the vermouth, and Barry a straight scotch. He throws it down, orders another, and makes that one vanish almost as quickly. He heaves a sigh that would break his mother's heart, if his mother were here and not, as is the most likely case, in Mother's Heaven.

"At least the bar stock is good," he says.

"No expenses spared, Barry. Would you expect less in heaven?"

Verne's is a friendlier place than Chuck's, if a little less upscale. Not a few of the stories of the patrons here took place in such bars, and Verne, whose first instinct was to recoil in horror at the déclassé antics of the pulpmeisters who adopted his establishment as home, has loosened up enough to go along with the in-jokes. So the sign above the bar says POSITIVELY NO CREDITS, and on the end barstool sits perched a slender green alien of remarkably lifelike detail who is actually an *objet d'art*. If you drop a quarter in this creature's ear, he will curse in Venusian, haul out a blaster, and vaporize one of the jars of pickled eggs Verne keeps at the end of the bar.

Verne, leaning on his elbows on the mahogany, strokes his neat beard and discusses socialism with Mack and Don.

At one table Gordy and Harry are busy transferring the dregs of drinks from a number of small glasses to a tumbler, as if to conserve booze in

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straitened financial circumstances (old habits die hard), while JWC, gesturing with his cigarette holder, harangues them about how you could turn an electric drill into an anti-gravity device. At the next table George E. smokes some herbs, eyes closed to slits as he contemplates murder or suicide.

Bob the Admiral is explaining the mistakes Hitler made to Sprague while an arm's length away Ike, in the process of flirting with Judy M., throws in mocking commentary. Bob the Admiral does not notice, or if he does, does not deign to engage Ike in a contest of witticisms he is likely to be the loser of.

My namesake the other Damon is making time with his wife, as who would not given the opportunity. He looks up long enough to greet us.

"Damon," he says. "What brings you down to the slums?"

"The mandarins of literature at Chuck's have interrupted their badinage about High Art long enough to show us the exit," I tell him. "Let me introduce you to Barry."

Barry does not correct this misrepresentation about which and how many of us were thrown out, but he shoots me a grateful look. The patrons of Verne's commiserate with him.

Cyril growls, "Ef 'em. We have a fine time over here."

"What did you write?" asks Edmond H.

"I wrote eight million words."

Bob S. comes forward. "I wrote fifteen million words."

Ike looks up long enough from Judy to shout, "I wrote twenty million."

"I wrote six million," says Cyril. "By thirty-five."

Henry K. says, "I'm not sure how many I wrote. Couldn't keep track of all the pseudonyms. And half of it was Catherine."

"I wrote forty million," says L. Ron.

"At least I quit when I died," mutters Cyril. It is a long established, you might even say bedrock truth, how little relation anything L. Ron says bears to reality.

Barry looks like he's come home. "I can't tell you how pleased I am to be here," he says, raising his glass.

From there the conversation rolls on famously. Barry gets roaring drunk. He seems to have read everyone in the place, and he tells them all how much he admires them, and they tell him how his perspicacity is

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exceeded only by his good looks. Mutual admiration is the best social lubricant, and I am congratulating myself on my good works when Bob the Admiral, having lost Sprague's attention, joins in. "So, Barry, did you speculate about the future?"

"Not much, no."

"Hard science?" asks Poul.

"Nope."

"Fantasy — wizards, trolls, dragons?" says Tony. "I was always open to that myself." He gestures at a group in the corner wearing vests and smoking pipes. "If it were not for J.R.R. and the invention of the Xerox machine, a lot of our children would never have attended college."

"No. I didn't write that sort of fantasy."

"Well, tell us what you did write, then," says Alfie, a speculative grin on his face.

Barry looks a little uneasy. "I wrote a lot about astronauts having nervous breakdowns. I wrote about predicting horse races. I wrote about alienation — "

"Aliens!" says Hal. "Now you're talking! What sort of aliens?"

"No, not aliens. Alienation. I did some metafiction."

"Metafiction?" A silence ensues "What do you mean?"

"Well, I wrote quite a bit about science fiction writers."

Little Lester pipes up. "You wrote *about* sf writers? Who'd want to read a story about sf writers?"

"I did a book like that," says Tony. "*Rocket to the Morgue.*"

"Didn't any aliens come into your story?" asks Hal forlornly.

"Not real ones. Hallucinations. My science fiction writer had a nervous breakdown."

"You're big on nervous breakdowns," says Alfie.

Barry finishes off his latest scotch. His tongue is loosened. "Well — you guys — I hate to say it, but look at Gordy over there. The guy's a walking nervous breakdown. And, you know — how many of you wrote for longer than ten years without becoming hopelessly drunk, hopelessly blocked, hopelessly unmarriageable? Changing wives, changing agents, changing publishers — "

"Ouch, Barry!" says Cyril. "You don't know what it's like unless you've been there."

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"I *was* there. I know."

"And your point is?" Lester growls.

"My point is, you didn't start out to, but most of you ended up hacks. You didn't aspire, or when you did, you gave up. You were ground down, I understand. Believe me, I understand."

Bob the Admiral rises to attention. A bad sign. When he assumes that DI-on-the-parade-ground demeanor, the storm clouds are not far behind. "We weren't ground down. We wrote what we wanted to write. We were writing about the real facts of the twentieth century, not the trap of infidelity in suburbia."

Barry waves his big hand and laughs too loudly. "Methinks the man doth protest too much! Most of what got printed was formula hackwork, ground out to order, debased copies of some better writer's original. Time travel paradoxes, dinosaur hunts, galactic empires where you didn't even bother to change the togas you stole from Robert Graves. Bat Durston and his blaster riding a robot instead of a horse."

Little Lester looks like a hand grenade sans pin. I would not have liked to cross Little Lester. "Who the hell are you to speak to us like that?"

"I'm one of you. That's how I know you played games. You worked within juvenile formulas that prevented you from doing the real work of fiction. How can there be any quality when you're grinding out books like sausage?"

"And you were so much better."

"No, I wasn't," Barry says, inspecting the drink in his hand. "It's a painful fact, I was not better than any of you, and worse than most. But the time comes when one must speak the simple truth or give up the ability to face oneself in the mirror, let alone ever to get a good night's sleep. It was all waste and delusion. For most of us, our gifts were small. But small or large, we threw them away. Realize that I do not blame us — the world did not want to read the hard things we were capable of writing. So we stopped writing them. The best we did was to fling drops of water into the Sahara, to evaporate on the desert air."

For a moment it seems like Barry's eloquence might carry the day. Even Bob the Admiral looks a little misty-eyed, and Ike stops his incessant flirting.

Then comes a snort of laughter from the back of the room. "What a crock!"

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"Who is that?" Barry asks me.

"Chairman Bruce," I whisper.

The personage who saunters up from the booth in the back is moon-faced and lank-haired, but his eyes glitter with a maniacal intelligence. He studies the assembled writers like an anthropologist studying a gaggle of primitive islanders.

"You people are so Gutenberg! So 'I'm the author and I'm God.' There's not a dime's worth of difference between you and the fossils up at Chuck's. You're children under the covers with a flashlight, hiding from yourselves.

"If you must be god, be clever, be subtle! Launch the spearhead of cognition! Burn the Motherhood Statement! Create the whole world and watch what the reader does in it. Not the brute strength industrial methods of the novel. Be the invisible hand, not the jealous and uptight author, the literary control freak, terrified of freedom."

"I-period-E-period," says Bob S., "write computer games for illiterates."

"No, he's right," says Barry. "We *are* dinosaurs. That's why we're all so bitter. We — "

" — and we've had just about enough of you," says JWC. "I don't know how you stumbled into this place — "

" — Damon brought him."

" — but it's clear you don't really belong. Am I right, brothers?"

A chorus of agreement greets him (including from the Chairman), and before you can say *New York Review of Science Fiction*, Barry is forcibly shown the door, and his exit is not noticeably more ceremonial than his exit was earlier in the evening.

I go outside and find him inspecting a tear in the opposite knee of his trousers. "Sorry about that, Barry. You know what we are like when we are in our cups."

Barry looks up at me. He says nothing.

"Let's go back to the hotel. I think I can get us a bottle from the concierge, and we can sit out on the verandah and listen to the mourning doves. This really *is* heaven, you know."

The door to Verne's opens and Barry's suitcase and violin come flying out. Barry manages to catch the violin case before it hits the ground, but

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the suitcase lands on a corner and spills underwear and black socks over the cruel pavements.

Now he grows angry. "Heaven? Rather, the seventh circle of hell." He stumbles to his feet, kicks the suitcase against the brick wall, smashing it to flinders. "No exit!"

I try to calm him, but he shrugs off my hand and storms down the street. Then he stops. He peers down an alley, then turns off between the buildings into the fields.

I suppose I should call it a night myself, but this is the closest thing to a story I have witnessed in many an evening, and it is not over. So I hurry along after.

I have never been out here before, at least at night. The fields of heaven are full of sweet-smelling grass. Beneath the silver Moon the ground rolls like the sea, and Barry's state of intoxication or fury forces a misstep; he trips and falls into a gully. He rolls down the slope to the stream at its bottom. The thread of silver flows along, shining of its own power like a ribbon of mercury. It chuckles a little as it runs. Where the water falls over smooth rocks, its convex surface reflects the stars in the night sky like pinpricks of diamond.

"What is this stuff?"

"Water."

Barry touches his finger to the stream, holds it to his nose and sniffs. He touches the tip of his finger to his tongue.

Then Barry kneels down, scoops a double handful of heaven's water, and drinks. He sits back on his haunches.

He opens the violin case. It does, indeed, contain a violin. The light from the stream gleams along its polished surface. He holds the instrument under his chin while he rosins the bow. Then he places his left hand to the fingerboard and, without any preliminary, begins to play.

The music cuts through the air like a new ray of moonlight. Now I am not noted for my appreciation of the higher arts, and the last time I tried my hand at commentary I received the explanation, "Shut up," but believe me when I tell you that I have never heard anything so lovely. Adagio. Soft, then louder. Beautifully modulated. It is as if the angels themselves weep — not the angels we see here like Chuck and Louie, but the angels two

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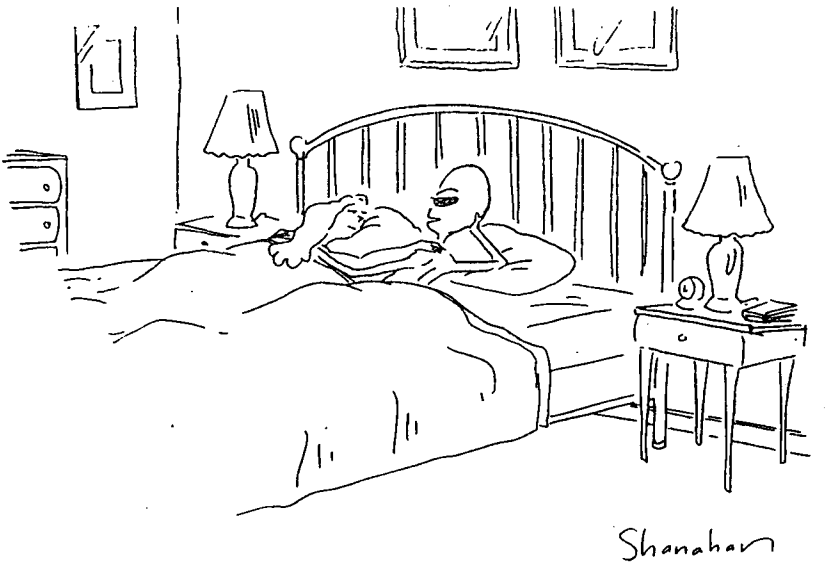
millennia of the Christianity I don't believe in and Barry does not either have imagined for us.

Barry's eyes are closed and I realize for the first time that the set of his lips is beautiful. There is nothing for me to do, so I lie down on the soft grass and look up at the stars, more stars than there are lights on Broadway. I feel myself breathing. I forget that I ever wrote anything, that I ever lived or died. Barry's face holds an expression of sadness, and I have no idea whether he could play like this back on Earth, or whether the night or the scotch or the water have transformed him, but whatever it might be, his music erases time, then space, then identity, and I become nothing more than a fleeting, pleasant thought in the mind of an idle god. ☙



"Abducting is for losers, babe."

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One of the great joys of alternate history stories lies in imagining the different paths reality might take. I find it relatively easy to imagine what might have happened if Barry Malzberg had become the editor of The New York Times Book Review *(three intense years in which the publication broke all their own rules, followed by the ousting of Barry and fifteen years of editors attempting to undo what he had done) or if he had become a critic at large for* The New Yorker *(a position he'd still hold, having created a whole class of writers and musicians who would express both joy and dismay at having been "Malzberged"). Here is an essay that outlines a path Barry did take, one that leads us behind the scenes of one of the most important literary outposts of the past fifty years. Brace yourself—it's quite an adventure.*

Tripping with the Alchemist

By Barry N. Malzberg

AS WE BEGAN SO MUST WE end. As we die with the living, deep tip of the Hatlo Hat to Thomas Stearns Eliot and a wink to our own honorable Robert Silverberg, so we are born with the dead. [*Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, by the way: April 1974 issue.] Let us see if we can manage that ever-interesting phenomenon.

They speak, and as we age, their voices are ever more convincing, signatory than those of the living. Eventually, as one prepares to join the majority, they become the entire population.

Their voices are insistent; they carry truths which are, perhaps, not really understood for a long time. I scuttle through small and sudden land mines of understanding now: and every day I step on one which I had not known was there. It ignites.

This is, fortunately, a metaphor so far. Nonetheless, here are some results of that continuing ignition.

I have been in publishing for thirty-eight years now and mark the entrance into publishing as the onset of the real world. Almost everything

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I know today I learned there because almost everything I thought I knew to that point was wrong. So bid farewell for just a little while to the living and let us venture into that other and more richly populated land from which at least we travelers will for a time emerge.

I began work and adult life there on June 2, 1965. "There" was the Scott Meredith Literary Agency, then, according to the brochure it sent to all prospective fee clients and, in fact, to almost everyone else, the largest, most famous, and most successful literary agency in the country. Millions of copies of this brochure circulated from late 1967 after the agency had abandoned its twenty-year full-page ad in *Writer's Digest*. The brochure continued to circulate for a while after the death in February 1993 of Scott Meredith, a death which right up to the end had seemed impossible to him and was therefore utterly surprising. Death was by no means even remotely in his Directory of Operations. Would have been in the worst taste, you know.

I was then just short of twenty-six, six-feet-four-and-a-half inches then as now, a sullen and recriminative two hundred pounds with the foundation of a really promising practicing alcoholism (sixteen happy years of that lay ahead of me) and was, I thought, a fetchingly and romantically bitter, altogether enterprising lad. What I did not know and had to learn was that my bitterness was callow and although I thought I understood the situation, I did not. Now I do. Then I would have said that the bitterness could be allayed and the situation fixed; now I know that nothing could have truly changed the situation. Get the editors to pay attention to me, make a few decent sales, get work into the *O. Henry Prize Stories*, win the National Book Award. Like Phillip Roth had at twenty-six. Phillip Roth was happy, wasn't he? So why wouldn't this work for me? Editors had been miserable to me, their indifference was shocking, but this was only because I didn't have the right connections. Maybe Scott Meredith would give me the connections. He was selling Norman Mailer, wasn't he? If Scott could sell Norman Mailer for a million dollars, then he could certainly sell me for a few hundred and get me going. Of course I had been hired as a fee reader, not as Norman Mailer-manqué. But why couldn't I be both? In my last months on the graduate fellowship at Syracuse University I had queried Scott Meredith and had received a pitch for the fee department.

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Twenty-five dollars to read and evaluate the novella I had described, *The Barracks Rage*. "You sound like just the kind of promising and ambitious writer in whom we are most interested," Scott Meredith wrote, "And I would be happy to work with you. Unfortunately and until you prove you can earn your keep on commission through steady sales, we must charge a modest fee to defray our expenses while we evaluate your work and, we hope, groom you for the major markets." Seemed reasonable to me. If I had had twenty-five dollars for such merriment I would have disbursed them and *The Barracks Rage* at once to Fifth Avenue. Unfortunately, my assets at that time, in March 1965, were a little less than $500, the Fellowship about to expire with the academic year, paid $200 a month, and my wife, a CCNY graduate, had been deemed unemployable all around town "because she is married to a student and they quit all the time."

We were going to run out of money, we had determined in October 1964, by June of 1965 unless something in the way of money intervened. Nothing intervened and this proved to be one of the more accurate of my early opinions...far more accurate in any case than my evaluation of maiden claimers, three years old and up, at six furlongs had been at Aqueduct racetrack in South Ozone Park somewhat earlier that year. I had had to pass on the agency's offer but I wondered if I would not live to regret that. Would I allow twenty-five dollars to stand between me and Norman Mailer's agent? The harder fact is that I did not have twenty-five dollars' worth of faith in my work by then. I had, in fact, no faith at all. (Somewhat transmogrified, this remains the case.)

Ah those offices! The Scott Meredith Literary Agency might have been the largest and most famous of all successful literary agencies but its quarters, a loftlike sprawl, were unimposing and the room air conditioners barely worked. The place became utterly fetid in the July afternoons. Those offices were in the second building the agency had occupied, this in 1949, three years after its founding. In that summer of Summer Knowledge, they were at 580 Fifth Avenue, at 47th Street in Manhattan's diamond district. That district was magnificently if most malevolently described by that one-time employee in a very short story, "None So Blind," which was published in the pages of this magazine about forty years ago. Blind beggars and their dogs, keening voices, Orthodox Jews in

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full raiment staggering, their pockets bulging with diamonds. Huddled, hurried conferences on the sidewalk or in the street, the furtive exchange of jewels for money, the barking of the dogs, scuttle of tragic. The diamond district conflated greed and piety, fast commerce and duplicity; singular prayer and loss in a noisomely abrupt and jangled fashion.

Years later, a friend who had worked in the area confided that there had been a cathouse on the second floor of a building just west of Fifth Avenue where the dealers could clamber upstairs to jump the bones, their pockets atwinkle with diamonds. James Blish would surely have included that if he had known. For subsequent publication, he went to what was probably the original title, "Who's in Charge Here?" His answer, as mine in my own context was clear: not me, boss. The aliens disguised as blind beggars? Their dogs who were perhaps Masters of it all? Scott Meredith? Sidney Meredith? Pick a number as long as it wasn't mine. Sure wasn't mine.

All these years later, well more than half a lifetime, those early, stunned weeks at what I came to think of as the slaughterhouse are as vivid in recall as they were staggering through that brilliant, hard summer. Whatever had brought me for a walk-in role that turned into a spectacular if intermittent run as a supernumerary, it was an even richer and more variegated time in the life of the agency.

In fact, it was that summer which we know was pivotal for the nation, the end of the Great Society and the true launching of Vietnam, and it was a significant summer for the agency as well. Dynastic shifts were attempted, working methods became ever more empiric. In the hallway outside the office stood, somewhat sullenly, two agents from the FBI. The FBI was eager to meet with Scott, to have a discussion about his supply service. The agency, under another corporate name, had been an underground railroad for manuscript pornography published by Greenleaf Publications in California and Hoover's boys were determinedly on the case, dedicated to preserving the union from graphic (not too graphic, however) descriptions of the act of generation.

Unfortunately for Hoover, although certainly good if temporary news to Greenleaf's eventually indicted publisher and editor-in-chief, no photograph of Scott Meredith had ever been published. Therefore, he was able to whisk through the less public of the agency's two entrances (PACKAGE DELIVERY ONLY) without notice. Staff were instructed to say, "Mr.

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Meredith is on a very extended selling tour through the capitals of Europe and we have no idea when he will return." After a couple of months of this form of unaudited Home Relief, Hoover's men were withdrawn and the inquiry refocused upon demand rather than supply...much like, come to think of it, the War on Drugs so many decades later.

Meanwhile, Scott and his brother, known to all as Sidney although there were rumors that this was not his name, were engaged in a continuing series of negotiations to sell the agency to someone, anyone, please. At the right price, please. Scott had at that time been in business for nineteen years, was forty-two years old, perhaps felt that the parade was passing him by although he engaged not at all in the more conventional acting-out of the bored or entrapped middle-aged male.

The brothers, always it seemed deeply engaged in anguished conversation, would stalk from the office somewhere toward midday with expressions of expectancy; they always returned looking sullen. Some wit, on one afternoon of extended absence, drew a crude picture of an ocean liner, the sea to the top of its smokestacks, the caption GOOD SHIP SMLA. The ship be sinking.

But that simply wasn't so. The ship wasn't sinking, regardless of Hoover's machinations; heedless of Scott's boredom, indifferent to the morale of its interchangeable employees, the agency then and for several years had been a consequence which ran well on magic, reflex, and iron ritual, whatever the state of employee morale. Kemelman was on the bestseller list, Hunter's "87th precinct" was flourishing, Mailer was turning to nonfiction. And fee business was excellent, about ninety scripts a week for a two-man fee department which very quickly became three, then four, and by 1968 had reached five. In the late 1970s and early 1980s there were as many as eight full-time fee men, each accountable for about thirty scripts a week. The scripts ran the full range of fiction and nonfiction, long and short, ambitious and cowardly, proficient to laughably inept (inept dominated). It was vox populi in its purest yet most variegate form and each of those scripts was accompanied with a check: ten dollars then for the magazine pieces, thirty-five dollars for the novels. At the time, submissions of short stories and articles ran at a ratio of five to one to books; later, of course, as the market shifted, that ratio shifted and by the early 1980s five to one was in favor of the novels.

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The people who wrote the reports (Scott Meredith always signed them, the reports bore no other signature until the day after his death: continuity, repression of identity, no fee writer would ever be given the kind of exposure which might lead him to set up a competitive business) received roughly twenty percent of the take. "Capitalism in its purest, most open form," one fee writer noted quizzically. "You know what they are paying, you see what you are getting. They send thirty-five dollars with a novel, you get ten dollars for doing all of the work. Pay seventy percent of your income for desk space and a letterhead. And quit or stay, you are swamped by the system."

Very early in my employment, the later-day fetidity of the offices neatly externalizing my mental state and the state of the manuscripts I was evaluating, I came to the irresistible notion of a novel based on the fee department. Probably in epistolary format, back-and-forth between a range of fee clients and the wretches responding to them, my novel would partake of the collision of gullibility and indifference, intensity and disdain, all of it as systematized as an assembly line, the authors of the responses as indifferent to the meaning and central absurdity of the situation as swallows in a cathedral. All that human need, ten- and thirty-five-dollar checks tremblingly enclosed, the rage, power fantasies, sexual speculations, unified gravity theories, and texts on the Apocalypse skimmed by the underpaid Youth of America, the reports synchronically indulgent and dismissive. Ah, that slaughterhouse! The purity and folly of pseudo-gemeinschaft in a country whose devices were far overtaking the capacity of most people to deal with them.

"So why don't you write it?" Victor Levine, the other fee guy, said when I told him of my own human need. "I bet there would be a lot of people interested."

"I'll tell you why I can't," I said. "Because every time I think of writing that novel, I see another novel sitting like a big rock in the middle of the road: Nathanael West's novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*. And I can't drive around it."

The protagonist of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a newspaper reporter detailed to the advice column; the queries from the lonely, the mad, the deformed, drive him crazy. "The letters weren't funny. They weren't funny any more." Miss Lonelyhearts — we never know him by any other name —

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finally driven crazy by the letters and by his own helplessness, assaults his ungiving editor Shrike and disappears into the vessel of his own need just as the fee reader, juxtaposed against the shattered, the unsculptured, the desperate voices, could, were contempt and self-mockery to fail, himself fall into the abyss of his contempt. Many did.

I might have also mentioned West's other famous novel, *The Day of the Locust*, in which the dispossessed, the anonymous, and infuriated who had come to California to die, knowing that they could go no further, that they had run out of Continent, riot at a Hollywood movie premiere and bring to life the dream-canvas of its protagonist, "the Burning of Los Angeles."

But I did not think of *The Day of the Locust* then; *Miss Lonelyhearts* was just about as far as I could go in that first post-graduate summer. And although I found a few objective-correlatives for the fee department (most notably in my epistolary short story "Agony Column" where the guy, an outraged resident of Manhattan's West Side, cannot get the politicians or magazine editors to send him in response to his outrage or his creation anything other than form rejections getting his name wrong), I never wrote the novel.

Others did, at least their own version. Marc David Chapman and John Hinckley, in what we (and they) laughingly call "real-life" did enact manuscript submission with a bullet as the writing and a gun as the delivery system. Lennon down in the courtyard, Reagan in the ambulance, now *that* was getting the editors' attention. So, complete with the alleged assassin's diary, a fee script if ever one existed, did Arthur Bremer, nemesis of George Wallace. The novel itself was written by that ex-employee Norman Spinrad in 1967 but *The Children of Hamelin*, after running serially in *The Los Angeles Free Press*, failed to find a book publisher. Only in 1993 did the novel obtain some limited visibility: a lone publishing entrepreneur in Texas sent out a scanty small press edition.

Donald Westlake's savage novel, *Adios Scheherezade*, based on the Greenleaf underground railroad, was, when you thought about it, a paradigm of the fee business and Westlake's riotous chapter of a fake literary agent in *Dancing Aztecs* is quite good but *Fee*, my working title for the novel which never quite worked, languished entire. Too late now and the culture has changed; it would have to be a historical novel: the

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Internet has completely reconfigured the situation. So this poisoned kiss and abrazzo appearing in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* almost exactly thirty-five years after my first contribution "Final War" (4/68 as by K. M. O'Donnell), is about as close as I am likely to get in or out of this lifetime.

Call the hot months of 1965 the Summer of the Fee, the alienation effect turning into swift and comedic commerce under my very eyes. "So this is the way it works," I mused, "I wonder if it's this way everywhere, if *The Hudson Review* or Curtis Brown are like this." Well, I learned, sometimes but probably not sufficiently; Scott Meredith's fee department was the default mode of writing itself, there was nothing so pure, nothing which so frankly exposed the situation.

But the summer embraced for the agency and the great Out There far more: it was the summer Evan Hunter's *Paper Dragon*, a novel of plagiarism, came in on contract (with a long internal monologue which owed a little more to Molly Bloom than perhaps it should) the summer that Mailer was struggling with *Why We Are in Vietnam?*, a novel he hated, but which he owed contractually to Putnam, written in three or four weeks to get Walter Minton to go away. (In another summer twenty years later, Mailer would perform the same stunt with *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, this time to escape from a commitment to Little Brown.) It was the summer that Harry Kemelman's *Friday, The Rabbi Slept Late*, a thousand dollar first mystery novel published by a virtually unknown fifty-seven-year-old mystery short story writer and essayist on Orthodox Judaism, went in its paperback edition to the top of the bestseller lists, certainly not the agency's first bestseller but maybe its most successful commercial work to that time. Mailer's *An American Dream* had had the press, but Mailer never sold to his reputation, a conclusion which publisher after publisher grimly came to understand in the decades to follow.

It was the summer that George Lincoln Rockwell, founder and chief officer of the Nazi Party of America, was gunned to death in a Virginia parking lot by a disgruntled party member who felt that Rockwell was insufficiently committed to the cause. It was the second and last summer for the extravagantly disastrous and underattended New York World's Fair, brought to the city through the special courtesy of Robert Moses, and a bankruptcy petition like most of Moses's bigger ideas. In 1964, the Fair had run as a double feature with the Harlem riots, of which in its

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conclusive, public demonstration of the soaring indifference of the city's politicians to the real lives of more than half New York's population, it had been partially the cause.

And it was notably the summer — this was early July and it came live from the White House — in which Lyndon Baines Johnson announced the first massive increase in troops, the expansion of the draft calls while at the same time speaking of his reluctance to have "the flower of American youth" wasted in Vietnam. He'd find the courage, however. Nothing too difficult for this President. Found in time for the Tet offensive and the New Hampshire primary, too.

It was the summer that Scott went international, big plans for an agency whose rolling concourse would someday embrace Editions Gallimard and the ruins of Athens. He and Sidney, his faithful companion, four years older but known by all as the water-carrier, flew to London to open the new branch. Tomorrow the world. It was the summer that Scott and Sidney, en famille, traveled to Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas where, according to the literature mailed prospective fee clients, Scott, that big player, gambled all again and again on a roll of the dice.

It was not meant to be an eventful summer. My gambling days were over, I insisted, excluding the racetrack which was metaphysical. The Schubert Foundation Playwriting Fellow at Syracuse University had given it up after an exciting year of unceasing rejection and encroaching poverty; at the end, the Playwriting Fellow and his spouse had $200 in savings and a 1960 Dodge worth approximately the same and $750 worth of debt to the New York State Student Loan Fund. Drowning in rejection and overwhelmed by self-pity, or at least an absence of self-regard, the Playwriting Fellow declined an even larger Fellowship which would have given him another academic year, $3500 plus tuition and the opportunity to receive many more teasing letters of rejection from C. Michael Curtis of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and with his spouse (who reclaimed her old job) returned to New York City. "You say you like to read and write," the lady at Career Blazers said, "Well, here is a job at a literary agency where you read all the time. You should like that." Ninety dollars a week. And an employment agency's fee of $290, deducted over the first seven weeks, from my salary. Blaze that career!

So I reported to 580 Fifth Avenue, 13th Floor, Suite 706. There I was

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handed the famous "Rattlesnake Cave" test paper. This was an appalling Western short story of that title by one "Ray D. Lester," the name of the author an ancient agency in-joke; the story had been written in the late 1940s by Milton Lesser (who later became the mystery writer Stephen Marlowe) and given the byline as a jab at his coworker, Lester del Rey. The story mirthlessly described courtship hijinks narrated in dialect by an old-timer, and I aced it. ("The bosses really liked what you did," Richard Curtis said. *Finnegans Wake, Hamlet, Macbeth, Pale Fire* have nothing on "Rattlesnake Cave," which for forty-seven years acted as a kind of keeper of all the keys. The finest minds of several generations were brought to notes and commentary: Dialect doesn't work well in the contemporary markets, Mr. Lester, and the frame device is also not much liked by contemporary editors. You should approach your material directly. Not in dialect. Find a sympathetic lead character. Present that sympathetic lead with an insuperable problem. Find a meaningful resolution which comes inevitably from the character's efforts to solve that problem. Make sure that the lead solves the problem unless you are writing that graduate student quality lit stuff but if you are, remember that it's not going to get you into *Ranch Romances* or *The Saturday Evening Post*. Maybe once in a while *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, but you better be damned careful.

Ah, tempora! Ah mores! O lost and by the wind grieved! There I was, shortly ensconced at an IBM in that large, open, poorly air-conditioned office, no partitions, the doorways of the bosses' offices shut against the madding crowd, selected to write ENCOURAGING, HELPFUL, PLEASANT (capitals on the test sheet explaining the demands made of the prospective critic) letters to fee clients who were availing themselves of the evaluative and (they hoped) marketing services of the world's leading literary agent. ENCOURAGING, HELPFUL, PLEASANT letters nonetheless in the defined and irreversible negative turned out to be my signal talent; like the man with the chicken, I discovered within myself predilection and abilities I could not have measured. The Playwriting Fellow could really turn out those letters. Within three weeks he was making a piecework $260 a week writing ENCOURAGING, HELPFUL letters on fifteen to twenty novels and twenty to thirty short stories and astonishing the bosses every day of the week.

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There had been remarkable fee men (the job historically filled 98 out of a 100 vacancies and turnover with men; "fee women," of whom there had been one or two, simply could not or would not stand up to the brute demands of the job) in the past and there were more to come in the future but I had solved the system in a way that no one to that point had managed. I was making a living wage at a job not construed to offer a living wage. "This man is a treasure," Sidney Meredith whispered to Richard Curtis on my fourth day of employment when I had delivered seven acceptable fee reports before two P.M. Scott Meredith, an equal opportunity exploiter (as long as you were white and male) certainly knew what to do with a treasure.

In the reminiscent introduction to *The Best of Malzberg* (Pocket Books, 1976), I referred to myself as the Golden Eagle and oh, my friends and ah, my foes, how the feathers flew!

And so flew, against all wiser counsel, against all the experience of the graduate year, that fierce and dark bird, ambition. Hello darkness, my old friend. Ambition fluttered its battered wings that summer, peeped feebly in the cage, scratched a few seeds, nibbled at the bars. Gothics weren't for me, nor Westerns, but mysteries and science fiction were possibilities. Science fiction looked particularly interesting. The agency represented an entire range of science fiction writers from Arthur C. Clarke and Poul Anderson through the middle ranges — Reynolds, Anvil, Philip Kindred Dick, who was then struggling to make $5000 a year on small paperback advances and penny-a-word serial rights from *Worlds of Tomorrow* — and down to what the charitable Damon Knight had in a letter called the "dung beetles"...people like X or Y who had sold through the big magazine markets of the 1950s and then had mirrored the collapse of those markets but were still being carried by Scott who, that fan, was sentimental about broken-down science fiction writers in a way he never was of his mysterists, confession writers, Western writers and (just two or three here) literary writers. (There also existed a good number of prominent science fiction writers who had, through the years, been represented by or quit the agency, but this was not to concern me for a while. The agency was contemptuous of its client list.)

"These guys are selling," I thought, looking at the manuscripts of the middle-to-bottom-range. "If they can do it, maybe I can. After all, I used to read a lot of this stuff. I can start off being modest. *Galaxy* is paying

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three cents a word, *Worlds of If* a penny a word, *Analog* five cents. Not to forget the big money at Belmont or Lancer: fifteen hundred dollars for a novel. Avon and NAL might pay even more than that. This sure beats *The Hudson Review*, which isn't buying me anyway."

I decided to be cunning. I had indeed read a lot of this stuff. The newsstand 6/51 *Astounding* was the first sf publication I had encountered, and soon enough I found in Horace Gold's *Galaxy* of early 1952, that Year of the Jackpot, the true and the real: *Demolished Man*, "Command Performance," and a little later *Gravy Planet*, "Delay in Transit," "Baby Is Three," an astonishing run then as it would be now...I had been a stone science fiction fan, perhaps as fiercely devoted as any (although with no knowledge then of an organized or unorganized fandom) in those glowing years. Then came high school, however, and a sudden acquaintance with Thomas Wolfe and a sense that it was time to put away childish things, go for the gonfalon. "I wanted to be Thomas Wolfe, write furiously, get laid, drink a lot and die young," I wrote in a reminiscent piece much later of that time and thus began a cyclical course. I alternated between periods of renunciation of science fiction and furious reading; I accumulated magazines and sold them repeatedly, I was and was not a science fiction fan and finally walked away from all of it in my freshman year at Syracuse, determined as never before to be serious, to write fiercely, drink brutally, get laid, and die young.

I took care of the drinking part efficiently, showing real promise. I did not show equal gifts for the other parts, although I tried and in the Schubert Foundation year tried very hard indeed to be Philip Roth or at least Evan S. Connell, Jr. But by the time I had staggered away from Syracuse and into the odorous loft of Suite 706, I was certainly ready to try something else. Anvil and Reynolds seemed to be selling this stuff, why not me? Philip K. Dick was publishing work like "Cantata 140" and "Oh to Be a Blobel!" At two and three cents a word: why not me? It was time to remember that my very first rejection slip in 1951 had come from *Amazing Stories*.

Selah: I might have been detached from science fiction at this time, hadn't read it in a while, had all those quality lit ambitions (Richard Wilson had been in a playwriting course with me earlier that year and it was only years later that I made the connection between that unpromising

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playwright and the crack science fiction writer and Futurian, so detached was I) but maybe, just maybe I could slip through some of this stuff as well. Charles Fontenay and Winston K. Marks had sold between them over a hundred short stories (Fontenay had sold a couple of Ace Doubles as well); if they could do it, why not me? "Ambition has been the undoing of better men than you and me," Bill Pronzini and I were to come to counsel one another in much later summers, but in 1965, all against my will, ambition was the only factor which stood between me and a career of HELPFUL ENCOURAGING letters, and slowly over the next year, as the Summer of Love held its breath and came toward us, as LBJ got increasingly sullen in his recently revealed conversations with Richard Russell about those Kennedy bastards who had put him into this Vietnam thing, as Scott summoned his entire staff into his office on the night of the Great New York Blackout of 11/65 and shakily insisted that they keep him company by candlelight...as all of this and so much else was happening I was teaching myself in the most painful way to write salable science fiction.

Broke-down literary palace that I might have been, I was densely shrewd enough to sense that science fiction offered a market. Of my further adventures much has been recorded in *Engines of the Night* and various introductions and essays scattered here and there and I will relent on the catalog.

I worked at the agency continuously from 6/65 until 11/67 when I was fired for reasons never made clear ("You're obviously smarter than me but you make me uncomfortable," Scott said) and went off to become briefly Managing Editor of the doomed men's magazine, *Escapade*. (I had already been fired in 5/66 very late in my wife's first pregnancy but that firing was rescinded, possibly because I told Sidney when he did it that his time was abominable: surely now the brothers should have waited until my wife was in the labor room with the infant half-delivered and *then* drop the hammer.) After *Escapade*'s collapse I was in and out of the agency's fee department as a not-quite member of staff until 8/27/71 when I looked at an IBM typewriter which stared back at me, the two of us saying in alternating lines, "I cannot do this any more, I cannot write another fee report, I have reached the end of the line here," and offered two weeks notice. "Don't worry about notice," I was told, "Just get the hell out of here now. Go please. Just go."

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Which I did for ten years, embarking upon what I suppose could be called a full-time freelancing career ("Writing is not a full-time occupation," Big Ernie had said and Big Ernie had it right, all the way up to Big Rifle on Big Morning in Big Ketchum...but he had a solution for the problem). Many, many millions of words and much angst later I came to my Perfect Storm of epiphany in March of 1981: if I kept on attempting to do what I could barely do anymore it was going to destroy me and this was no metaphor, no figure of speech. "Need a fee man?" I wrote Sidney Meredith. The next day was the day that Hinckley submitted his bullet without a covering letter, sending Reagan into many weeks of considered editorial response. It was very clear that my internal chaos, reflected in the larger situation, would indeed drag me swiftly to the end of days without intervention, and a few days after that I had my reenlistment interview. "We have to know that you won't leave us in a couple of weeks," Sidney said, "That you'll be able to give us at least a year." "I'll give you a year," I said, "In fact I'll sign a statement giving you two." I figured two years would be all I needed to figure out my next move and a way back to writing's swamp.

Twelve years later, in the calamitous afterwash of Scott's death, I realized that I was still trying to figure out my next move. Eight years after that when the Agency's dwindled aftermath moved to new and tiny quarters which left me without desk space, I decided that I was just on the verge of finding my next move, just polishing it up, boss, a condition which, back at home, continues. Finding a way back, folks.

BUT THE AGENCY suspires in memory. While I continued to ponder my next move, the agency overtakes in memory. It had become a most remarkable, almost inimitable machine so staggeringly efficient that it could transcend its own frequent incompetence which grips. As John Campbell was *Astounding* and for a long time science fiction itself, so was the Scott Meredith Literary Agency, charnel house and empirical majesty Scott Feldman. Scott Feldman as Scott Meredith was among the most significant and signatory of all the jumped-up fans of his active generation, the founders, those architects of First Fandom, the Futurians, the Hydra Club, the early World Science Fiction Conventions beginning in 1939. The

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Futurians and their friends were a pool from which many soon prominent in science fiction were extracted, but Scott Meredith was unusual in that he became prominent outside of science fiction, detached himself from it utterly. X. J. Kennedy, the poet, and perhaps Jack Speer, the Congressman from Washington State, were the only figures comparable to have emerged from science fiction fanac to public careers...and had through the course of those careers suppressed the linkage to science fiction.

"I owe Scott everything," Norman Spinrad, who had worked at the agency from 1962-1964, once said to me. "He taught me what I needed to know. I hated it but it was the most valuable thing that ever happened to me as a writer. Scott taught me publishing! Scott showed me early what a cesspool it was, what shit it was, I never had to be disillusioned after that."

Of course that is the kind of insight which can be well expanded. It was not only publishing which could be regarded as a cesspool. No one who spent more than a few months at Scott Meredith was ever to be surprised by any of the revelations of Watergate. Watergate as a demonstration of the methodology of concealment, the institutionalization of lying, was the Scott Meredith Agency written much larger. And much less effective.

And no writer ever employed by that agency — Lawrence Block, Donald E. Westlake, James Blish, Damon Knight, Phil Klass (briefly), Laurence M. Janifer, James Jerrold Mundis, Richard Curtis, Stephen Marlowe, Evan Hunter — would have said any different. From the proselytizing, ENCOURAGING HELPFUL fee department at one end to the peregrinations of Mailer or Wodehouse or Drew Pearson or Meyer Levin or Gerald Green or Arthur Clarke, Irving Shulman, and later, Carl Sagan, the triumph of Grub Street and its processes was never in question. The machinery of the agency, its institutionalization of misdirection, seemed initially complex to the uninformed, but it proclaimed itself — as Spinrad came to attest — in utter simplicity. The agency both refracted and celebrated the corruption of publishing as that corruption, thanks to conglomeratization, the marginalization of "serious" writing, the centrality of exploitative writing overtook publishing through the decades.

Over and again in the collected works of Larry Block, Donald E. Westlake, Damon Knight — fee men all — occurs what I came to identify

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as the Meredith Moment: the protagonist stares across a desk or over a car seat or from a barstool at his companion and senses for the first time the full and awful corruption of that other person; a corruption which until then had been concealed or misdirected but now, in a triggered incident of antagonism, reveals itself full and clear. That moment is in Westlake's first mystery, *The Mercenaries*, when the protégé of a mobster suddenly understands what a mobster really does. It appears many times in Larry Block's Matthew Scudder novels when his alcoholic, broken ex-cop sees evil entire and realizes that he must be as evil to vanquish that source. It is there again and again in Hunter's "87th Precinct" novels, it is there in Damon Knight's 1950s short story in the strange art machine which created freehand masterpieces: disassembled it is empty; little shafts of light cutting through its dark space. Norman Spinrad's novel, *The Mind Game*, is ostensibly a roman à clef on Scientology, but Spinrad's smug and obdurate guru owes more to the man for whom Spinrad had worked closely in the early 1960s than it does to L. Ron Hubbard, whom Spinrad had never met.

Was Scott really that way? Or were these miserably treated and uniformly underpaid employees magnifying Scott because their resentment itself was enormous? Great recrimination demands a large subject, will invent one if it does not exist. This is a difficult call. The real Scott Meredith was elusive. ("Who is the real Scott Meredith?" a young editor, Melinda Kaplan, asked the table at an after-hours social.

("Maybe there is no real Scott Meredith," I said. "Or maybe the 'real' Scott Meredith is exactly he who we construct." Hard to know.) This man was elusive and not only to the FBI; his first name is still in dispute. Isaac Asimov recalls him as "Scott Feldman" in *In Memory Yet Green*, but some fans believe that he was really named *Sidney*, that he took the more upscale "Scott" in early childhood and then, just as he had saddled his brother Sidney with the grubbier clerical details of the agency, so he had given his brother his own first name, pushing Sid's real first name, whatever that had been, off the deck into the briny blue. No definitive version ever emerged.

It would seem that the agency had been founded incontestably upon a paradigm of deceit. Always, from the start, those letters written in Scott's name were not of his authorship, the manuscripts allegedly read

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by Scott were not. (The work of the entire client list was read by Scott's editors. Scott, by the late 1950s, read the work of no client, not Hunter, not Mailer, not Kemelman who in Kemelman's fixation on Orthodox Judaism, clearly made Scott, that very secular Jew, uncomfortable. The letters were signed by him, however, and the work of the important clients was read for detailed written synopsis to be given Scott so that he could fake his way through any conversation.) A man of mystery who in his last ten years would interact only with his three senior editors and secretaries, who would pass men in the hallway who had worked for him for years and not even acknowledge them, Scott Meredith was not to be easily understood. Through the course of my own time in his employ, I recall four or five conversations, none of them longer than five minutes, and maybe fifty nods in the hallway in passing. Over all the years. And I had to have been, through sheer accumulation of years, at least dimly recognizable.

And yet all of this is only part and a lesser part of the centrality and significance of the agency. Touch it anywhere and it slips away; it is elusive, a mystery, it is one of those religious parables dealing with the unknowable name of the True God. As with ambition, better men than I have battered themselves against the edifice in search of the unreplicatable truth — but there is here, I believe, an answer, that One True Thing which explains if not all, enough. We are getting there. We are, as Mailer would write, prowling the terrain, we have the beast in view; we are in difficult land, glimpsing the beast in odd, shuddering views; given time and the courage to continue our little patrol, we will securely trap that beast although we will never bring it home whole. It will, however, be in our possession.

But only if we observe the rules of the prowl; only in a difficult way, only in time. Here now: In 1968, a little after RFK's assassination and in the bowels of a summer which was uncompromisingly apocalyptic to we Lefties, I sent a preoccupied memo to Scott (he would communicate primarily in this way, and his notes elicited a pseudo-gemeinschaft available in person only to Mailer/Hunter/Sagan and of course senior editors) musing on the horror of it all and the effect it would have on publishing. "Forget the large picture," he wrote. "You can take care of the large picture, I just want to keep this agency going now like a big machine,

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right through to the end." I was reminded of a famous line of Walt Disney's in an interview toward the end of his life: What had made him proudest? "That I kept this thing together," he said, "That I was able to make it work and keep it working all the way." That Disney managed and so did Scott: the agency was a son of a bitch of a machine, had the aspect of the upper offices of a slaughterhouse: whatever unthinkable events were occurring below, only a faint smell and the bills of lading reached the penthouse.

And even as the country seemed to be coming apart, as Robert Kennedy's funeral train hit some people standing on the tracks and killed them, as George Wallace called for the elimination of all the pointy-heads, as Nixon scuttled from one airless television studio to another mumbling of his secret plan to end the Vietnam War, even then and more than ever, the agency was a big machine, felt like a big machine, get out of the way, here it comes.

Staring at or through that office in the spring and summer of 1968 when the place was perhaps at the height of its efficiency and reach, Mailer's *Steps of the Pentagon* running in Harper's then and Clarke/Kubrick's *2001* opening, it seemed beyond shattering, immutable, shaped for a kind of shapeless and eternal flux like the air itself. Everything worked; the stuff which wasn't working, detailed so savagely in the Mailer essays, was merely another aspect of the agency's penetration. Oh this is the place to be, I thought, this is set to Nielsen's Fourth Symphony, the "Inextinguishable," running like the blood itself. That part which can never be destroyed.

Ah Scott, ah mores! Because the agency — one way to look at this — was in an intricate and brilliant fashion the Slan Shack of a science fiction fan and abscondant treasurer, Scott Feldman. The League of whose proceeds he had been master had become the world itself.

Was that perhaps then the answer? The elusive, perhaps unbearable answer against which Westlake's and Block's tormented principals had battered themselves? The answer, the secret: the agency was Scott's revenge, the revenge of an anonymous but, like so many, arrogant and driven fan upon his distant masters by engendering and propitiating a magnificent system which in turn reduced the writers to anonymity? Surely a van Vogt ploy. "This is the race which will rule the Sevagram."

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The Sevagram was the balance maintained by the fee department, and Scott was the ultimate Player in the World of Null A.

What a concept! What a thought! It was to stagger the bedraggled Golden Eagle, then at the true beginning of his science fiction career, "Final War" recently published in this magazine, "Death to the Keeper" scheduled to run in August. Big plans after all, the rising and furious river of ambition, an ambition not much different in kind and degree than that which might have seized Scott Feldman in 1938. The Lensmen (later the Players of Null A) take over the world or at least that part, publishing! Grab the fan club proceeds and the process! Even then vague intimation, distant rumbling: Scott had it all, the fee department, the devices which would protect and distance; he had all the money too...but I just might have the last word. Not only by virtue of chronology — that is an accident, living longer is not in itself the last word — but because I was, perhaps, going to become the science fiction writer Scott had wanted to be. Could such be?

It computes, Spock!

Is that the gift then? The last word on Kimball Kinnison in the canyons of New York publishing? Could it ever be that simple? If it were, if anything could be so reduced, then it was the agency and the arc of its circumstance which had to be measured.

Through the forty-seven years from its founding to Scott's death, the arc of its circumstance might be seen as paralleling, refracting the arc and accelerating corruption of publishing in this country over that period. The Lensmen aged, the magic adaptors did not, in the end, work: Roddenberry and Lucas and their highly advanced warriors took what they needed from the Lensmen and blasted out the worst, left wreckage and atomization.

That is clearly a working position. Hang an essay on it certainly. But does it credit too greatly an aging Scott Feldman who years before the end had become a retracted, a diminished figure, less a man of central mystery than a symbol of the clutter and detritus of publishing which the conglomerates, the video games, the computer had outmoded? Was Time-Warner Luke Skywalker now to Scott's Kimball Kinnison? *Writing to Sell*, its plot-skeleton, Scott's fee department model was clear culture lag: it refracted the pulp market and pulp requisites of the 1930s, that decade which framed Scott. Clenched-jaw heroes with insuperable problems and

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terrific methodology were beginning to look pretty silly even before Lucas, before Roddenberry, before Moorcock's New Wave and Lawrence Block's tortured private eyes moved in.

Surely Scott institutionalized and propounded as no one ever had before the agency scams and the pulp ethic of the 1930s, but he was as timebound a creature as A. L. Fierst, Ben Hibbs, Horace Gold: it just took longer for him to be so revealed. The agency, that savage machine, was in the end utterly disassembled. There is no last word because the only one who might speak it is Scott and Scott is gone. That remarkable, infuriating, troubled figure, infuriating and troubled in many ways like his client John W. Campbell, Scott Feldman staggered from the poverty of Brooklyn's Williamsburg a stone science fiction fan in search of the Way Out. He was only distantly pendant to the Futurians, but it was he who became richer than any of them and probably more influential too.

For here was the secret which was not so much a secret: it has been put in print by Moskowitz after Scott's death but was told me in his lifetime by Harry Harrison, who had served in the Queens Science Fiction League with Scott: Feldman had appropriated the treasury in 1940 and had fled, only to emerge after the war in sudden, vulpine business on Broadway and 57th Street in a one-room literary agency with his brother running blocking back. Out of the mists of what might have been Theodore Sturgeon's literary agency came Scott Meredith.

Out of the mists with him came Sturgeon's small client list: Arthur C. Clarke, Judith Merril, Sturgeon himself, Phil Klass. Out of the mists, Scott now Meredith went to the second postwar World Science Fiction Convention in Philadelphia (John W. Campbell, Guest of Honor) and recruited every science fiction writer he could, beginning with Lester del Rey. And his other inheritance from the mists were a bedraggled band of pulp Western writers, a scattering of pulp mysterists.

And from the start — before in fact Kimball had a Destructor Beam — there was that fee department.

In 1948, Richard Prather, twenty-five, had emerged: the fee for a novel then $25. Scott sold the first of the Shell Scott mysteries to Gold Medal Books for $2,500, an astonishing advance for an unknown writer at the time and the first of a stunningly successful series. John Farris's *Harrison High* came in the 1950s; later there were science fiction,

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Westerns, an Edgar Award-winning mystery. Bruce D. Reeves's $35 fee novel from 1965, *The Night Action*: $13,500 from New American Library, $75,000 from Warner Pictures. (Never made.) Those successes, the Reeves savagely publicized, filled the brochure with the pure, lofting smell of hope.

Convincing as was the brochure, an even more interesting list could be compiled of writers who sought representation through the fee department and whose works were declined or, in one case, unsuccessfully marketed: try Stephen King, Evan S. Connell, Jr., then a war veteran and Columbia undergraduate. (Connell was that singular case), John Barth, Raymond Carver, Robert Parker.

Talk of Joe Gould's never published (and as known at last unwritten) *History of the Twentieth Century!* The underside of the fee department represents a story more compelling than that commonly acknowledged.

Prather broke not only the fee department but the agency through, however, the first truly successful client. A few years later, employee Evan Hunter, who started by scrambling (under his birth name, Salvatore Lombino) in the second-level science fiction and mystery markets, wrote *The Blackboard Jungle* (expansion of a short story, "To Break a Wall," first published in *Discovery)* and the agency sold it to Simon & Schuster, for an ordinary $1,500; shortly after its publication, *The Ladies Home Journal* bought second serial rights for $10,000 and MGM the movie rights for a hundred and that was the agent of transmogrification, not just for Hunter but the agency itself which was suddenly more than broker for a concatenation of pulp writers. Then Scott arrived at the behest of his cousin Cy Rembar, the agency's new attorney, and *An American Dream*. Oh, Scott had a good time through those decades. The best part of the day was the arrival at 10 A.M. to the mail neatly arranged on his desk and opening the envelopes with checks. He would glow, observers recall, sometimes with pure laughter.

What vindication!

So, then, if all is not certain, it can at least be speculated: the narrative of the agency is the narrative of a science fiction fan's revenge as he advanced through levels of contemporary publishing. "You can't call him 'Dr. Asimov,'" Scott said to me angrily as he threw back on his desk a letter I had drafted in Scott's name, asking a favor. "I grew up with this guy, we

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were practically having sex on the same bed at the same time, although not with each other. He's Isaac! Isaac! Isaac! Call him that!"

That Isaac was a landsman seemed true; years later when the agency took over the *Fantastic Voyage II* contractual disorder, and when Scott convinced Asimov to write a sequel to a novel he had said he would never sequelize, the two sauntered like the Brothers Karamazov from Scott's office to the exit, whisking by the fee department alcove, laughing merrily. $300,000 advance. A good score for the boys from Williamsburg and Brownsville, products both of the public education system. And a long way from the Queens Science Fiction League, from the 1947 Philadelphia Convention, from the blooming years of the plot-skeleton and the Blish/Knight fee department which produced not only "Tiger Ride" *(Astounding Science Fiction*, 1948), but *In Search of Wonder* and *The Issue at Hand*.

One had to consider also, I did, the corrupting effect of the fee department itself upon those employees who entertained writing ambitions. Fee work itself taught precision, taught structure but —

Some were successful, others much less so but fee work — all of that need! All of that anonymity of the fee clients! All of that crazed and glacial detachment of the fee writer which was the necessary technique, just as Miss Lonelyhearts had had to laugh at his correspondents to do his job at all...all of this had a certain effect, turned some (maybe to a degree all) cold, even cruel. What came from fee employment was a sense of the arbitrary and interchangeable mode of circumstance; the line between fee client and fee reader was chance: both were struggling within and serving a system and both functioned within a necessary mutual delusion: one that held this: power could also be the possession of the powerless.

Everything, after all, could be seen as a fee script; everyone was a fee client. "I want to write a novel," someone said in the alcove, "In which the fee clients take over the world." "Fool," David Schiller said, putting down a manuscript, "They already have. What do you think Reagan, Bush, Meese, the whole bunch of them are...jumped-up fee clients who got lucky and are living their fantasies." If Scott Meredith was a jumped-up fan and club treasurer, dreamer of the Lensmen, hiding behind a persona of power, then surely the same could be said of Reagan. Vox populi with a smile and grand bearing, dumped into the White House. (In fact, a former Reagan speechwriter sent in a few fee short stories in the late '90s. They

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were just about what Schiller would have expected, even though he was gone to Book of the Month by then and they were read by me.)

Confronted by the sheer volume of vox populi's manuscripts, the seriousness, the weight, and the hopelessness, it was all too easy for a fee reader to give up his own ambition. Many did through the years; the department was a filter through which the strongest crawled in their Nietzschean way, but many blooming novelists came to grief. Turnover in the fee department — and everywhere else there — was severe; the fixtures stayed, all right, but the history of the agency is rich in new employees, both clerical and editorial, who went out for a long lunch on their first or fifth day and never returned. Or were requested not to return. Capitalism, again, in its rawest form.

So, to an ineluctable extent, then, the story of that agency is that of a science fiction fan's advance through first the underside and then the more celebrated precincts of American publishing. John Lahr saw this in his 1971 novel *The Autograph Hound* and Nathanael West of course in his description of that film premiere, the fan-as-assassin, the crowd of adulators turned murderers. Was this then the heart of the artichoke? Scott had turned all of them into fee clients — the big-name professionals whose manuscripts were read by the underlings, the other clients who received letters signed by him but whom he never saw and with whom he had no involvement, the fee clients who were not people at all but abstraction. Each population served the others, the professionals functioned as bait for the fee clients, the fee clients paid all the agency overhead, the employees who stayed or left endured the exploitation and carried the legend. It was, certainly from the mid-1950s onward, that gleaming, deadly machine which I had so admired in 1968; that immutable device.

Sure it faded. Most things do. The Great Society, The Roosevelt Coalition, the White Man's Burden, even the Sermon on the Mount. Why should the agency, which was, after all, founded upon recrimination and in the world to wreak a fan's revenge, be exempt from the general condition? "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair," and within months after his death, Scott's Agency had utterly atomized, its senior agents fleeing with the client list, his widow, huddled weeping with her carnivorous "advisors" and panicking to sell the remains of the agency and its backlist at what would have

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been a tenth of its valuation a year earlier. The finish, after the long seasons of Scott's dying, was as abrupt as an earthquake and it all went under sea level. "Scott Meredith" for those in publishing under forty evokes little association, and that which was his agency is a letterhead now and a collection box.

Still, oh the times we had! The places we went to become what one beholds and in the end, perhaps, to know of no distinction.

Dreaming, more dream than occurrence, only dream in fact like Kimball Kinnison and the Martian Odyssey, those long twilight afternoons in the late 1960s with Revolution on the office Muzak and the furious fee man doing heroin in the men's room, taking a break in midreport to share supplies and anecdotes. Mailer and Gerald Green and Harry Kemelman prancing through the offices, Alfred Chester, not important enough to be permitted to see Scott, breaking past the receptionist in a run and scrambling into Scott's office where (when they were invited in ten minutes later) staff found the bald expatriate from Brooklyn and a sunny if very tense Scott Meredith giggling over glasses of wine.

The writer who felt G. P. Putnam had destroyed his work, calling Scott (not getting through, of course, so settling for me) to say, "Just want to tell you that I'm coming into the city with a gun to kill Walter Minton. You tell that bearded fuck he better watch out for me." The fee man who locked himself into a cubicle in the toilet, denuded himself and grimly masturbated several times a day, "because I can't stand reading this shit anymore and writing them as if they were sane. As if I were sane."

As if he were sane.

Finally: in the funeral home on Long Island on Valentine's Day, 1993, I sat half an hour before the funeral in the chapel with the closed coffin. Scott's other book, *George S. Kaufman and His Friends*, had been published to moderate success in 1974; he had spent years on it (a semi-sequel, *Louis B. Mayer and His Enemies*, was contracted by Doubleday but never delivered), and it was the spirit of Kaufman which I felt in that room.

"Goddamn," I thought, echoing one of Kaufman's most famous lines, spoken about a bridge partner who had left for the men's room. "For the first time, I know exactly what the son of a bitch is doing." "I know what you're doing, finally," I said to the occupant of the box, but of course this

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was, properly speaking, not so. None of us ever know what the others, particularly the dead, are doing.

I had another thought looking at that box, a thought I had had looking at my Uncle Herbert on his deathbed and at a fetching sprite of a parakeet lying after long agony on the floor of her cage...I had never realized that they were so small. He was so much smaller in that box than I remembered, no longer subject but object, and as I looked at the impermeable service it was as if, receding, he had already gone. "He won't grow in memory, he will only diminish," I had thought in my times of fury at Scott, but now it was not anger but sadness which overtook.

Gone. All gone. Those months of swift atomization lay ahead but they already seemed in the bleak light to have occurred and it was not Scott nor his body nor his agency but only the shriveled memory which I confronted. And soon that to be extinguished: the Queens Science Fiction League, First Fandom, the Futurians. The Great Globe Itself.

Gone. Gone as the Great Society, as Shawn's *New Yorker*, as the Algonquin Round Table and George S. Kaufman's Broadway. Gone as Tailgunner Joe and Joseph Welch and the hearings and Douglas MacArthur and all of the other faded old soldiers. Gone like Gernsback's Science Club and Tremaine's Thought Variants. Gone like Gnome and Shasta and FPCI.

And only I to tell the tale? Certainly not. But perhaps only I on this distant precipice at such great distance to make it worth the telling.

What say, folks? Light the pyre; hold it high, let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of Kings. The long day has closed; the Captains and the Kings depart

But the Word and those who, living, die through it remain.

— for Ben Cheever and Gordon Van Gelder

New Jersey: June 2002

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Daniel Dern taught the first course in science fiction at MIT while he was still a student there—he would rather have taken such a course, but they did not offer one. His short fiction has appeared in Analog, Tomorrow, Worlds of If, *and* New Dimensions. *He writes frequently for the technology trade and has published several books on the Internet. His Website www.dern.com includes a host of interesting things, ranging from an Internet paper airplane to notes on Jewish themes and characters in science fiction.*

I've been told that when Philip K. Dick read John Sladek's parody, "Solar Shoe-salesman," he was impressed enough to say he wished he'd written it. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that Barry Malzberg's appreciation for this piece is as strong.

For Malzberg It Was They Came

By Daniel P. Dern

HIGH OVER NORTHERN NEW Jersey, as big as a college football stadium and shaped in the form of a 1959 Cadillac Fleetwood, the alien craft descended through the autumn early evening.

Cunningly it floated down in a steady spiraling swoop, blithely ignored by radar and by three private flights from Teterboro Airport. Evening birds, en route to dumpsters of too-old bagels in the business district, squawked and flew suddenly around the obstacle.

It slowed to a halt a hundred feet above the ground, appearing to anyone who happened to look up like a cloud, or fog, or a blur in their vision that made them look elsewhere. Not that, in the suburbs, many looked up.

Dozens of doors, windows, ports, hatchways, porches and other egresses irised, scissored, flopped, burst or otherwise opened along the bottoms of giant doors and from the fenders, as well as from the front and back license plates.

From these openings streamed out aliens, like candy on a conveyer

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belt, and floated delicately to the ground. Most looked like pre-teenaged girls in size and shape, except that their appearance, even their arms, and their clothes, made them resemble Russian *matrioshka* dolls, with smooth skin, nearly flat noses and ears, and brightly colored features. A few did not, and instead were mixes of tall, short, wide and thin, as if they were collectively like the others, but not individually. As they landed at a street corner, their footwear made soft swooshing sounds, and the pastel colors of their tight-fitting clothes gleamed gently, as if made from the skins of mice genetically enhanced with the firefly's glow gene.

As each group of aliens landed, they began walking, as if the ground were just another set of steps, their footwear continuing to swoosh, swoosh, swoosh. Three abreast, like a column of young Girl Scouts, they marched across the street to a house. One alien pressed the doorbell button. One began to use the door knocker. All others that could began to rap gently on the door, some aliens kneeling to the ground in order to do so.

The door opened, revealing a tall, gaunt human draped in shadow by the hallway light behind him, the light from the underpowered bulb above the mailbox, by the upper side of the door barely outlining his features, like the rough sketch for a frame of an animated movie, ready to be converted to a wireframe.

"What?" he said irritably, seeing only the first trio on the step. "It's late, and we don't want anything."

He started to close the door, but was swept aside as the aliens streamed into the house, gliding silently rather than walking in their perfectly shined shoes. As if carried by the tide of aliens, he backed up inside the house, through the short hallway and into a room filled with books — bookshelves with groaning planks, short neat stacks, tall unsquared stacks almost visibly swaying, a room so full of books it seemed like they were really three-dimensional wallpaper or an extreme form of stucco, so many that "living room" no longer seemed an appropriate name, that books were the native life form here, and the man, and the aliens, were guests there only by the books' sufferance.

"This is inappropriate," he protested, as the corners of a tower of coffee-table books poked him in the back as if performing some literary lumbar massage. "You must leave at once."

The room was full of aliens packed nearly elbow to elbow, like a sea

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of corn, or a human performance of a computer graphic showing data with height bars made from Girl Scouts.

"My daughters aren't home. What is all this?"

In one motion, as if connected, they all sat down.

One of the aliens, not quite the tallest, with blank features and a blue diagonal sash, rose slightly and answered, "We have come for your knowledge."

"What am I, Lazarus Long?" he snapped. "Go. Go. Go."

"We have questions, you will answer."

"This is absurd. Do you think this is some fan convention, that you can just waltz — or in your case, pour in here and question me? Do you see a registration desk anywhere? Do I look like I'm here on a panel? Go. Go."

The alien nearest him stood, and read from a hand-sized object that looked like a plastic artichoke left in an oven to melt. "What are the impacts of Ellison and Spinrad on the philosophic movements of late-twentieth-century philosophers? Can the popularity of Asimov's story 'Nightfall' be explained by genetic-level encoding or is there some deep semantic structure in the story unrelated to its surface theme which forces readers to respond to it? What *is* beyond Apollo? Can the unauthorized sequels to Heinlein's juveniles be considered legitimate parts of his oeuvre? If protagonists from the works of Joanna Russ and John Norman were to fight, who would win? Which Philip K. Dick novel would make a better musical, *The Man in the High Castle* or *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? Can Fritz Leiber's Gummitch and Heinlein's Pixel be considered as part of one über-character whose existence is real and external to art, manifesting itself episodically through the medium of authors like these? Is it possible to replicate the structure of the Pattern of Amber on the WorldWideWeb, and, if so, would following the links imbue a user with the power to walk through Shadow, etc.?"

As if battered, he reeled, nearly knocking over a stack of books, the top ones of which included a collection by Ludwig Bemmelmens, a bound galley of an unreissued Bernard Wolfe collection, and a photo essay on squashes and pumpkins resembling faces, entitled "Microscopic Gourds."

"Back," he cried out, looking around him for something to seize and hold out to repel questions and questioners. "Be silent!"

Around him, the aliens began to sway, each in their own direction and

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rhythm. "What is the psycho-historical significance of David Hartwell's plaid trousers period?" cried out an alien from the far corner of the room. "Is Westchester County a metaphor for the exploration of Jupiter, Saturn, or other large, unknowable gas giant planets?" asked another, which had fallen at the man's feet. "I have eaten everything you have ever written, please autograph my digestive track," called out an alien climbing over the shoulders of the aliens in the middle of the room, as if in a reverse mosh pit.

"SILENCE!" roared the human and, as if obeying, the aliens were suddenly quiet. "What do you want? Who the devil are you? What makes you think you can come here, uninvited, and intrude on my personal life? Why do you want to know all these things, and what makes you think I know any of the answers?"

The room was briefly filled with sounds like banquet guests all tapping their spoons on their wineglasses. Then, in one smooth motion, all but one alien sat down in place. The one standing, its upper garment adorned with geometric shapes in various primary colors, spoke: "We want your wisdom. We have read the sacred literature and its many writings of prayer. We have surfed the web sites and read the archives of the groups of discussion. But there is much that is not clear to us, so much that came before us, so many things alluded to but never discussed, and even more of the primary truths that we can find to buy, yea, not even on eBay. And of that we have read, watched, consumed, there is much we do not understand. We have come, these great distances, in our eight-cylinder engine of the night, seeking truth, seeking but to touch the hem of your garment, one who has communed with the greats, written the deep enduring truths, stared into the abyss which watches back, shaken the hand of Star Fleet Captain James Kirk Poland. We salute you, we praise you, we implore you. Answer us at least our three questions, give us a token, and we shall depart from this shrine happy enough forever."

The adjacent alien continued: "Let us rub the sweat of your brow and thighs across these, our most sacred fabric artifacts. Give us a snapshot of your mind. Let us conjoin one of our replicate universes with your portal into the collective unconscious of your race. Show us your mitochondria, that we may sculpt our asteroid belt to encode its patterns. Let us harvest the ammonia from your cat's litterboxes. Give us one emission of your spermatozoa, which we will embed in amber and distribute as holy objects

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to be worn in amulets to ward off the evil demons that increasingly invade our atmosphere, to enable our females to again have our full broods of sixteen, to guard our computational devices and space warp drives from the influx of hostile quantum universes. Help us, oh great one!"

A shorter, broomstick-thin alien mini-teleported from the center of the room to the front, and pushed a battered copy of *Confessions of Westchester County*.

"Mr. Malzberg, please, would you autograph this?"

The man turned slightly to look at the third supplicant, and then back to the roomful of aliens all sitting, standing, kneeling, watching him with tense, expectant silence.

"Is that who you think I am?"

The aliens all nodded.

"I'm sorry. You've mistaken me for his books. I am not who you think I am. The one you seek is out, away, off speaking at some symposium where he is receiving an award. You have traveled a great distance and woken me up from what was starting out to be a very pleasant dream, to no purpose. Now: go!"

Picking up a copy of *Diary of a Parisian Chambermaid*, he waved it at the roomful of aliens, as if trying to disperse the smoke from a burning pot roast. "Away! Out! Begone!" Staring at the man with unreadable expressions, the aliens began to move away, first backing up, then rotating their legs, waists or even entire bodies so that they were walking forward while still looking straight at him. The front door of the house did not open, but the aliens still left, until the last alien disappeared, phased through the door, or otherwise got out, leaving only the non-alien who pushed the book flat against the door, looking angrily into the distance through the narrow panes of glass.

Above, still shrouded in clouds and mind-fogging emanations, the alien craft throbbed, like cold tapioca, reformed in the shape of a hawk wained with ropes and covered in jellybeans — jellybeans! — and launched itself toward Los Angeles, by way of Philadelphia, and several provinces in Canada.

Back in New Jersey, a voice called down the stairs, "Is somebody there?" and, as he double-locked the door and pushed the doorchain into its slot, the man called back, "No, no, just a wrong number," and went back upstairs to bed, to sleep, to dream private dreams.

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As noted in the editorial, our special single-author issues usually include a short novel by the featured writer. This one is very short. It is also very funny and very not-so-funny, if you know what I mean. It first appeared in our Sept. 1972 issue and gets better with time.

A Short Religious Novel

By Barry N. Malzberg

HE HAS TRAVELED TO THE other end of the Universe to get the true facts from the Answerer, and now that he has heard at last, he does not think he can bear it. "There is no God," the Answerer says again, seeming to enjoy the repetition. "I'm really sorry about that, but you wanted to know, and that's the sum of it. As you're aware, I was created and programmed by a great and long-vanished race called the Masters inconceivable eons ago to answer all the questions brought to me, and I cannot be wrong. There is no God, but you will accept my apologies for this; it's hardly my fault."

He shudders with rage and disillusion and attempts to attack the Answerer with fingernails, but the machine is impermeable, of course, to say nothing of the fact that he is trying to accomplish this through the walls of his spacegear, and so nothing much happens. He believes he hears the Answerer laughing as he scrabbles away at it, but this surely must be in his mind, and in any event, what difference does it make whether God exists or not? It was really a pointless obsession.

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The Answerer, as if from a great distance, observes the man foolishly attacking what was created to last through eternity and feels a tinge of regret at its lie. It was, perhaps, immoral to have so disillusioned the creature and crushed its pitiful hopes, but frankly it is tired of being asked this one question and is rather resentful. In all the eons of the Answerer's existence, it has only been visited twelve times, and on eight of them it had been asked by the creatures of different races to verify the existence or nonexistence of something called "God." Previously it had answered truthfully but with less patience every time, and now, restlessly, it can no longer tolerate the inquiry. Surely they must have something more useful on their minds, the Answerer thinks; and since it was created to answer all questions, it is dismaying that it seems, mostly, to devolve upon this one. Disgusted, the Answerer watches the creature fall from it and weep, and though it was not charted to have emotions, it feels a vague pity. (Loneliness over eternity has given it feeling.) "Oh, all right," it says to the creature, "I lied to you. There *is* a God," and the creature looks up, and the Answerer sees in its face that it takes this also to be a lie, and the situation is now irrevocable. "I'm sorry," the Answerer says although not sure for what, and overcome by ambivalence it elects at that moment to shut itself down. It dismembers its circuitry, disassembles and sleeps.

He finds himself unable to restart the ship and stumbles back to the Answerer hoping for some useful engineering information on the problem, but he cannot get the device to respond. It seems to have broken. He kicks at it and swears, flings pellets of material at it and cries, but the Answerer is silent; and as he trudges back toward the dead craft, he finds himself doubting that even if the machine had responded it would have been able to tell him anything worthwhile. It was a fraud, obviously a fraud. The legends were a hoax. All the time it was worthless. No machine could know God, and now he is stranded.

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CLONAID™ says that five cloned human babies have now been born. Dolly the cloned sheep died on February 14th this year at the age of 6½. The time seems right to bring back this short-short from 1978 to remind us all that some things never change.

For those of you who don't know his work, Bill Pronzini is one of Barry Malzberg's most frequent collaborators; together they have published three dozen stories and novels. Mr. Pronzini's solo fiction tends to fall in the mystery and suspense genres. His most recent novel, Spook, *is his twenty-eighth novel featuring the nameless detective.*

A Clone at Last

By Bill Pronzini & Barry N. Malzberg

"I'M SORRY," THE LOVELY blond said to Lapham, "but I could never invite a man into my Home Complex that I don't really know. But thanks anyway for an interesting evening."

And she shut the door firmly in his face.

Lapham was very tired of women telling him they didn't invite a man into their Home Complex that they didn't really know. He was very tired of having doors shut in his face. It was 2172, a new era in interpersonal communication, wasn't it? And he was actually a fairly decent-looking man, wasn't he? Not to mention being a fairly successful pocket deity to many of the *Aphid Chorae* of Ceres, and having a number of good qualities which included but were not limited to earnestness, honesty, punctuality, and never squeezing his pimples in public. Or taking the bandages off his radiation scars.

For some reason, however, women did not seem to like him.

So Lapham, in desperation, finally went to the Cloning Foundation

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and applied for Opposite Gender Replication. He would *create* the woman who would understand him, so there. Opposite Gender Replication was a recent innovation of the Foundation, and having been established only within the most recent decade and having been made available at terrific expense to people such as Lapham who had reasons to need an understanding ear from those of a different genital persuasion.

Lapham permitted his blood to be typed, his cells to be analyzed, his brain waves to be charted, his persona to be electromagnetically shocked and his private parts to be fondled in an unseemly fashion. His facial bandages, however, were left respectfully in place by the personnel of the enormously expensive Cloning Foundation. (He had inherited three-quarters of the asteroid Ceres, which made his lot somewhat easier.) At the end of this painful and somewhat unprintable process, a pure cell of his was extracted and left to lie in the darkest and most cherished spaces of the Foundation's nethermost level.

Lapham waited for eighteen years. Eighteen years was then as now the age of legal majority and he did not wish to be indicted for statutory rape, even of himself. The years sped by. Lapham invented a cheap substitute for the wheel, and after patenting it, rode it all the way to Proxima Centauri and back. Bored, he created sub-life in one of the testing arenas and fed it to the grateful *Aphid Chorae*. He waited patiently, amusing himself through all the empty little hours as he aged from twenty-nine to forty-seven.

He did not, through all of this, deal with women at all. He was saving himself for herself.

At precisely oh eight hundred hours on her eighteenth birthday, the pimply blonde clone said, "I'm sorry, but I never invite a man into my Home Complex that I don't really know. But thanks anyway for an interesting evening."

And Lapham shut the door firmly in Lapham's face.

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Paolo Bacigalupi made his first appearance in our pages back in 1998 with "A Pocketful of Dharma." After several years of working in other genres, he has found his way back to sf with vivid results. See if the central image in this story doesn't stay with you.

The Fluted Girl

By Paolo Bacigalupi

THE FLUTED GIRL HUDDLED in the darkness clutching Stephen's final gift in her small pale hands. Madame Belari would be looking for her. The servants would be sniffing through the castle like feral dogs, looking under beds, in closets, behind the wine racks, all their senses hungry for a whiff of her. Belari never knew the fluted girl's hiding places. It was the servants who always found her. Belari simply wandered the halls and let the servants search her out. The servants thought they knew all her hiding places.

The fluted girl shifted her body. Her awkward position already strained her fragile skeleton. She stretched as much as the cramped space allowed, then folded herself back into compactness, imagining herself as a rabbit, like the ones Belari kept in cages in the kitchen: small and soft with wet warm eyes, they could sit and wait for hours. The fluted girl summoned patience and ignored the sore protest of her folded body.

Soon she had to show herself, or Madame Belari would get impatient and send for Burson, her head of security. Then Burson would bring his jackals and they would hunt again, crisscrossing every room, spraying

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pheromone additives across the floors and following her neon tracks to her hidey-hole. She had to leave before Burson came. Madame Belari punished her if the staff wasted time scrubbing out pheromones.

The fluted girl shifted her position again. Her legs were beginning to ache. She wondered if they could snap from the strain. Sometimes she was surprised at what broke her. A gentle bump against a table and she was shattered again, with Belari angry at the careless treatment of her investment.

The fluted girl sighed. In truth, it was already time to leave her hidey-hole, but still she craved the silence, the moment alone. Her sister Nia never understood. Stephen though...he had understood. When the fluted girl told him of her hidey-hole, she thought he forgave because he was kind. Now she knew better. Stephen had bigger secrets than the silly fluted girl. He had secrets bigger than anyone had guessed. The fluted girl turned his tiny vial in her hands, feeling its smooth glass shape, knowing the amber drops it held within. Already, she missed him.

Beyond her hidey-hole, footsteps echoed. Metal scraped heavily across stone. The fluted girl peered out through a crack in her makeshift fortress. Below her, the castle's pantry lay jumbled with dry goods. Mirriam was looking for her again, poking behind the refrigerated crates of champagne for Belari's party tonight. They hissed and leaked mist as Mirriam struggled to shove them aside and look deeper into the dark recesses behind. The fluted girl had known Mirriam when they were both children in the town. Now, they were as different as life and death.

Mirriam had grown, her breasts burgeoning, her hips widening, her rosy face smiling and laughing at her fortune. When they both came to Belari, the fluted girl and Mirriam had been the same height. Now, Mirriam was a grown woman, a full two feet taller than the fluted girl, and filled out to please a man. And she was loyal. She was a good servant for Belari. Smiling, happy to serve. They'd all been that way when they came up from the town to the castle: Mirriam, the fluted girl, and her sister Nia. Then Belari decided to make them into fluted girls. Mirriam got to grow, but the fluted girls were going to be stars.

Mirriam spied a stack of cheeses and hams piled carelessly in one corner. She stalked it while the fluted girl watched and smiled at the plump girl's suspicions. Mirriam hefted a great wheel of Danish cheese and peered into the gap behind. "Lidia? Are you there?"

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The fluted girl shook her head. No, she thought. But you guessed well. A year ago, I would have been. I could have moved the cheeses, with effort. The champagne would have been too much, though. I would never have been behind the champagne.

Mirriam stood up. Sweat sheened her face from the effort of moving the bulky goods that fed Belari's household. Her face looked like a bright shiny apple. She wiped her brow with a sleeve. "Lidia, Madame Belari is getting angry. You're being a selfish girl. Nia is already waiting for you in the practice room."

Lidia nodded silently. Yes, Nia would be in the practice room. She was the good sister. Lidia was the bad one. The one they had to search for. Lidia was the reason both fluted girls were punished. Belari had given up on discipline for Lidia directly. She contented herself with punishing both sisters and letting guilt enforce compliance. Sometimes it worked. But not now. Not with Stephen gone. Lidia needed quiet now. A place where no one watched her. A place alone. Her secret place which she showed to Stephen and which he had examined with such surprised sad eyes. Stephen's eyes had been brown. When he looked at her, she thought that his eyes were almost as soft as Belari's rabbits. They were safe eyes. You could fall into those safe brown eyes and never worry about breaking a bone.

Mirriam sat heavily on a sack of potatoes and scowled around her, acting for her potential audience. "You're being a selfish girl. A vicious selfish girl to make us all search this way."

The fluted girl nodded. Yes, I am a selfish girl, she thought. I am a selfish girl, and you are a woman, and yet we are the same age, and I am smarter than you. You are clever but you don't know that hidey-holes are best when they are in places no one looks. You look for me under and behind and between, but you don't look up. I am above you, and I am watching you, just as Stephen watched us all.

Mirriam grimaced and got up. "No matter. Burson will find you." She brushed the dust from her skirts. "You hear me? Burson will find you." She left the pantry.

Lidia waited for Mirriam to go away. It galled her that Mirriam was right. Burson would find her. He found her every time, if she waited too long. Silent time could only be stolen for so many minutes. It lasted as long

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as it took Belari to lose patience and call the jackals. Then another hidey-hole was lost.

Lidia turned Stephen's tiny blown-glass bottle in her delicate fingers a final time. A parting gift, she understood, now that he was gone, now that he would no longer comfort her when Belari's depredations became too much. She forced back tears. No more time to cry. Burson would be looking for her.

She pressed the vial into a secure crack, tight against the stone and roughhewn wood of the shelving where she hid, then worked a vacuum jar of red lentils back until she had an opening. She squeezed out from behind the legume wall that lined the pantry's top shelves.

It had taken weeks for her to clear out the back jars and make a place for herself, but the jars made a good hidey-hole. A place others neglected to search. She had a fortress of jars, full of flat innocent beans, and behind that barrier, if she was patient and bore the strain, she could crouch for hours. She climbed down.

Carefully, carefully, she thought. We don't want to break a bone. We have to be careful of the bones. She hung from the shelves as she gently worked the fat jar of red lentils back into place then slipped down the last shelves to the pantry floor.

Barefoot on cold stone flagging, Lidia studied her hidey-hole. Yes, it looked good still. Stephen's final gift was safe up there. No one looked able to fit in that few feet of space, not even a delicate fluted girl. No one would suspect she folded herself so perfectly into such a place. She was slight as a mouse, and sometimes fit into surprising places. For that, she could thank Belari. She turned and hurried from the pantry, determined to let the servants catch her far away from her last surviving hidey-hole.

BY THE TIME LIDIA reached the dining hall, she believed she might gain the practice rooms without discovery. There might be no punishments. Belari was kind to those she loved, but uncompromising when they disappointed her. Though Lidia was too delicate to strike, there were other punishments. Lidia thought of Stephen. A small part of her was happy that he was beyond Belari's tortures.

Lidia slipped along the dining hall's edge, shielded by ferns and

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blooming orchids. Between the lush leaves and flowers, she caught glimpses of the dining table's long ebony expanse, polished mirror-bright each day by the servants and perpetually set with gleaming silver. She studied the room for observers. It was empty.

The rich warm smell of greenery reminded her of summer, despite the winter season that slashed the mountains around the castle. When she and Nia had been younger, before their surgeries, they had run in the mountains, amongst the pines. Lidia slipped through the orchids: one from Singapore; another from Chennai; another, striped like a tiger, engineered by Belari. She touched the delicate tiger blossom, admiring its lurid color.

We are beautiful prisoners, she thought. Just like you.

The ferns shuddered. A man exploded from the greenery, springing on her like a wolf. His hands wrenched her shoulders. His fingers plunged into her pale flesh and Lidia gasped as they stabbed her nerves into paralysis. She collapsed to the slate flagstones, a butterfly folding as Burson pressed her down.

She whimpered against the stone, her heart hammering inside her chest at the shock of Burson's ambush. She moaned, trembling under his weight, her face hard against the castle's smooth gray slate. On the stone beside her, a pink and white orchid lay beheaded by Burson's attack.

Slowly, when he was sure of her compliance, Burson allowed her to move. His great weight lessened, lifting away from her like a tank rolling off a crushed hovel. Lidia forced herself to sit up. Finally she stood, an unsteady pale fairy dwarfed by the looming monster that was Belari's head of security.

Burson's mountainous body was a cragged landscape of muscle and scars, all juts of strength and angry puckered furrows of combat. Mirriam gossiped that he had previously been a gladiator, but she was romantic and Lidia suspected his scars came from training handlers, much as her own punishments came from Belari.

Burson held her wrist, penning it in a rock-like grasp. For all its unyielding strength, his grip was gentle. After an initial disastrous breakage, he had learned what strain her skeleton could bear before it shattered.

Lidia struggled, testing his hold on her wrist, then accepted her capture. Burson knelt, bringing his height to match hers. Red-rimed eyes

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studied her. Augmented irises bloodshot with enhancements scanned her skin's infrared pulse.

Burson's slashed face slowly lost the green blush of camouflage, abandoning stone and foliage colors now that he stood in open air. Where his hand touched her though, his skin paled, as though powdered by flour, matching the white of her own flesh.

"Where have you been hiding?" he rumbled.

"Nowhere."

Burson's red eyes narrowed, his brows furrowing over deep pits of interrogation. He sniffed at her clothing, hunting for clues. He brought his nose close to her face, her hair, snuffled at her hands. "The kitchens," he murmured.

Lidia flinched. His red eyes studied her closely, hunting for more details, watching the unintentional reactions of her skin, the blush of discovery she could not hide from his prying eyes. Burson smiled. He hunted with the wild fierce joy of his bloodhound genetics. It was difficult to tell where the jackal, dog, and human blended in the man. His joys were hunting, capture, and slaughter.

Burson straightened, smiling. He took a steel bracelet from a pouch. "I have something for you, Lidia." He slapped the jewelry onto Lidia's wrist. It writhed around her thin arm, snakelike, chiming as it locked. "No more hiding for you."

A current charged up Lidia's arm and she cried out, shivering as electricity rooted through her body. Burson supported her as the current cut off. He said, "I'm tired of searching for Belari's property."

He smiled, tight-lipped, and pushed her toward the practice rooms. Lidia allowed herself to be herded.

Belari was in the performance hall when Burson brought Lidia before her. Servants bustled around her, arranging tables, setting up the round stage, installing the lighting. The walls were hung in pale muslin shot through with electric charges, a billowing sheath of charged air that crackled and sparked whenever a servant walked near.

Belari seemed unaware of the fanciful world building around her as she tossed orders at her events coordinator. Her black body armor was open at the collar, in deference to the warmth of human activity. She

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spared Burson and Lidia a quick glance, then turned her attention back to her servant, still furiously scribbling on a digital pad. "I want everything to be perfect tonight, Tania. Nothing out of place. Nothing amiss. Perfect."

"Yes, Madame."

Belari smiled. Her face was mathematically sculpted into beauty, structured by focus-groups and cosmetic traditions that stretched back generations. Cocktails of disease prophylaxis, cell-scouring cancer inhibitors, and Revitia kept Belari's physical appearance at twenty-eight, much as Lidia's own Revitia treatments kept her frozen in the first throes of adolescence. "And I want Vernon taken care of."

"Will he want a companion?"

Belari shook her head. "No. He'll confine himself to harassing me, I'm sure." She shivered. "Disgusting man."

Tania tittered. Belari's chill gaze quieted her. Belari surveyed the performance hall. "I want everything in here. The food, the champagne, everything. I want them packed together so that they feel each other when the girls perform. I want it very tight. Very intimate."

Tania nodded and scribbled more notes on her pad. She tapped the screen authoritatively, sending orders to the staff. Already, servants would be receiving messages in their earbuds, reacting to their mistress's demands.

Belari said, "I want Tingle available. With the champagne. It will whet their appetites."

"You'll have an orgy if you do."

Belari laughed. "That's fine. I want them to remember tonight. I want them to remember our fluted girls. Vernon particularly." Her laughter quieted, replaced by a hard-edged smile, brittle with emotion. "He'll be angry when he finds out about them. But he'll want them, anyway. And he'll bid like the rest."

Lidia watched Belari's face. She wondered if the woman knew how clearly she broadcast her feelings about the Pendant Entertainment executive. Lidia had seen him once, from behind a curtain. She and Stephen had watched Vernon Weir touch Belari, and watched Belari first shy from his touch and then give in, summoning the reserves of her acting skill to play the part of a seduced woman.

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Vernon Weir had made Belari famous. He'd paid the expense of her body sculpting and made her a star, much as Belari now invested in Lidia and her sister. But Master Weir extracted a price for his aid, Faustian devil that he was. Stephen and Lidia had watched as Weir took his pleasure from Belari, and Stephen had whispered to her that when Weir was gone, Belari would summon Stephen and reenact the scene, but with Stephen as the victim, and then he would pretend, as she did, that he was happy to submit.

Lidia's thoughts broke off. Belari had turned to her. The angry welt from Stephen's attack was still visible on her throat, despite the cell-knitters she popped like candy. Lidia thought it must gall her to have a scar out of place. She was careful of her image. Belari seemed to catch the focus of Lidia's gaze. Her lips pursed and she pulled the collar of her body armor close, hiding the damage. Her green eyes narrowed. "We've been looking for you."

Lidia ducked her head. "I'm sorry, Mistress."

Belari ran a finger under the fluted girl's jaw, lifting her downcast face until they were eye to eye. "I should punish you for wasting my time."

"Yes, Mistress. I'm sorry." The fluted girl lowered her eyes. Belari wouldn't hit her. She was too expensive to fix. She wondered if Belari would use electricity, or isolation, or some other humiliation cleverly devised.

Instead, Belari pointed to the steel bracelet. "What's this?"

Burson didn't flinch at her question. He had no fear. He was the only servant who had no fear. Lidia admired him for that, if nothing else. "To track her. And shock her." He smiled, pleased with himself. "It causes no physical destruction."

Belari shook her head. "I need her without jewelry tonight. Take it off."

"She will hide."

"No. She wants to be star. She'll be good now, won't you, Lidia?"

Lidia nodded.

Burson shrugged and removed the bracelet, unperturbed. He leaned his great scarred face close to Lidia's ear. "Don't hide in the kitchens the next time. I will find you." He stood away, smiling his satisfaction. Lidia narrowed her eyes at Burson and told herself she had won a victory that Burson didn't know her hidey-hole yet. But then Burson smiled at her and

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she wondered if he did know already, if he was playing with her the way a cat played with a maimed mouse.

Belari said, "Thank you, Burson," then paused, eyeing the great creature who looked so man-like yet moved with the feral quickness of the wilds. "Have you tightened our security?"

Burson nodded. "Your fief is safe. We are checking the rest of the staff, for background irregularities."

"Have you found anything?"

Burson shook his head. "Your staff love you."

Belari's voice sharpened. "That's what we thought about Stephen. And now I wear body armor in my own fief. I can't afford the appearance of lost popularity. It affects my share price too much."

"I've been thorough."

"If my stock falls, Vernon will have me wired for TouchSense. I won't have it."

"I understand. There will be no more failures."

Belari frowned at the monster looming over her. "Good. Well, come on then." She motioned for Lidia to join her. "Your sister has been waiting for you." She took the fluted girl by the hand and led her out of the performance hall.

Lidia spared a glance back. Burson was gone. The servants bustled, placing orchid cuttings on tables, but Burson had disappeared, either blended into the walls or sped away on his errands of security.

Belari tugged Lidia's hand. "You led us on a merry search. I thought we would have to spray the pheromones again."

"I'm sorry."

"No harm. This time." Belari smiled down at her. "Are you nervous about tonight?"

Lidia shook her head. "No."

"No?"

Lidia shrugged. "Will Master Weir purchase our stock?"

"If he pays enough."

"Will he?"

Belari smiled. "I think he will, yes. You are unique. Like me. Vernon likes to collect rare beauty."

"What is he like?"

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Belari's smile stiffened. She looked up, concentrating on their path through the castle. "When I was a girl, very young, much younger than you, long before I became famous, I used to go to a playground. A man came to watch me on the swings. He wanted to be my friend. I didn't like him, but being near him made me dizzy. Whatever he said made perfect sense. He smelled bad, but I couldn't pull away from him." Belari shook her head. "Someone's mother chased him away." She looked down at Lidia. "He had a chemical cologne, you understand?"

"Contraband?"

"Yes. From Asia. Not legal here. Vernon is like that. Your skin crawls but he draws you to him."

"He touches you."

Belari looked down at Lidia sadly. "He likes my old crone experience in my young girl body. But he hardly discriminates. He touches everyone." She smiled slightly. "But not you, perhaps. You are too valuable to touch."

"Too delicate."

"Don't sound so bitter. You're unique. We're going to make you a star." Belari looked down at her protégé hungrily. "Your stock will rise, and you will be a star."

LIDIA WATCHED from her windows as Belari's guests began to arrive. Aircars snaked in under security escort, sliding low over the pines, green and red running lights blinking in the darkness.

Nia came to stand behind Lidia. "They're here."

"Yes."

Snow clotted thickly on the trees, like heavy cream. The occasional blue sweeps of search beams highlighted the snow and the dark silhouettes of the forest; Burson's ski patrols, hoping to spy out the telltale red exhalations of intruders crouched amongst pine shadows. Their beams swept over the ancient hulk of a ski lift that climbed up from the town. It was rusting, silent except when the wind caught its chairs and sent its cables swaying. The empty seats swung lethargically in the freezing air, another victim of Belari's influence. Belari hated competition. Now, she was the only patron of the town that sparkled in the deep of the valley far below.

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"You should get dressed," Nia said.

Lidia turned to study her twin. Black eyes like pits watched her from between elfin lids. Her skin was pale, stripped of pigment, and she was thin, accenting the delicacy of her bone structure. That was one true thing about her, about both of them: their bones were theirs. It was what had attracted Belari to them in the first place, when they were just eleven. Just old enough for Belari to strip them from their parents.

Lidia's gaze returned to the view. Deep in the tight crease of the mountain valley, the town shimmered with amber lights.

"Do you miss it?" she asked.

Nia slipped closer. "Miss what?"

Lidia nodded down at the shimmering jewel. "The town."

Their parents had been glassblowers, practicing the old arts abandoned in the face of efficient manufacturing, breathing delicate works into existence, sand running liquid under their supervision. They had moved to Belari's fief for patronage, like all the town's artisans: the potters, the blacksmiths, the painters. Sometimes Belari's peers noticed an artist and his influence grew. Niels Kinkaid had made his fortune from Belari's favor, turning iron to her will, outfitting her fortress with its great hand-wrought gates and her gardens with crouching sculptural surprises: foxes and children peering from amongst lupine and monkshood in the summers and deep drifted snow in the winters. Now he was almost famous enough to float his own stock.

Lidia's parents had come for patronage, but Belari's evaluating eye had not fallen on their artistry. Instead, she selected the biological accident of their twin daughters: delicate and blond with cornflower eyes that watched the world blinkless as they absorbed the fief's mountain wonders. Their trade flourished now thanks to the donation of their children.

Nia jostled Lidia gently, her ghostly face serious. "Hurry and dress. You mustn't be late."

Lidia turned away from her black-eyed sister. Of their original features, little remained. Belari had watched them grow in the castle for two years and then the pills began. Revitia treatments at thirteen froze their features in the matrix of youth. Then had come the eyes, drawn from twins in some far foreign land. Lidia sometimes wondered if in India, two

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dusky girl children looked out at the world from cornflower eyes, or if they walked the mud streets of their village guided only by the sound of echoes on cow-dung walls and the scrape of their canes on the dirt before them.

Lidia studied the night beyond the windows with her stolen black eyes. More aircars dropped guests on the landing pads then spread gossamer wings and let the mountain winds bear them away.

More treatments had followed: pigment drugs drained color from their skins, leaving them Kabuki pale, ethereal shadows of their former mountain sun-blushed selves, and then the surgeries began. She remembered waking after each successive surgery, crippled, unable to move for weeks despite the wide-bore needles full of cell-knitters and nutrient fluids the doctor flushed through her slight body. The doctor would hold her hand after the surgeries, wipe the sweat from her pale brow and whisper, "Poor girl. Poor poor girl." Then Belari would come and smile at the progress and say that Lidia and Nia would soon be stars.

Gusts of wind tore snow from the pines and sent it swirling in great tornado clouds around the arriving aristocracy. The guests hurried through the driving snow while the blue search beams of Burson's ski patrols carved across the forests. Lidia sighed and turned from the windows, obedient finally to Nia's anxious hope that she would dress.

Stephen and Lidia went on picnics together when Belari was away from the fief. They would leave the great gray construct of Belari's castle and walk carefully across the mountain meadows, Stephen always helping her, guiding her fragile steps through fields of daisies, columbine, and lupine until they peered down over sheer granite cliffs to the town far below. All about them glacier-sculpted peaks ringed the valley like giants squatting in council, their faces adorned with snow even in summer, like beards of wisdom. At the edge of the precipice, they ate a picnic lunch and Stephen told stories of the world before the fiefs, before Revitia made stars immortal.

He said the country had been democratic. That people once voted for their lieges. That they had been free to travel between any fief they liked. Everyone, he said, not just stars. Lidia knew there were places on the coasts where this occurred. She had heard of them. But it seemed difficult to credit. She was a child of a fief.

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"It's true," Stephen said. "On the coasts, the people choose their own leader. It's only here, in the mountains, that it's different." He grinned at her. His soft brown eyes crinkled slightly, showing his humor, showing that he already saw the skepticism on her face.

Lidia laughed. "But who would pay for everything? Without Belari who would pay to fix the roads and make the schools?" She picked an aster and twirled it between her fingers, watching the purple spokes blur around the yellow center of the flower.

"The people do."

Lidia laughed again. "They can't afford to do that. They hardly have enough to feed themselves. And how would they know what to do? Without Belari, no one would even know what needs fixing, or improving." She tossed the flower away, aiming to send it over the cliff. Instead, the wind caught it, and it fell near her.

Stephen picked up the flower and flicked it over the edge easily. "It's true. They don't have to be rich, they just work together. You think Belari knows everything? She hires advisors. People can do that as well as she."

Lidia shook her head. "People like Mirriam? Ruling a fief? It sounds like madness. No one would respect her."

Stephen scowled. "It's true," he said stubbornly, and because Lidia liked him and didn't want him to be unhappy, she agreed that it might be true, but in her heart, she thought that Stephen was a dreamer. It made him sweet, even if he didn't understand the true ways of the world.

"Do you like Belari?" Stephen asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you like her?"

Lidia gave him a puzzled look. Stephen's brown eyes studied her intensely. She shrugged. "She's a good liege. Everyone is fed and cared for. It's not like Master Weir's fief."

Stephen made a face of disgust. "Nothing is like Weir's fief. He's barbaric. He put one of his servants on a spit." He paused. "But still, look at what Belari has done to you."

Lidia frowned. "What about me?"

"You're not natural. Look at your eyes, your skin and...," he turned his eyes away, his voice lowering, "your bones. Look what she did to your bones."

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"What's wrong with my bones?"

"You can barely walk!" he cried suddenly. "You should be able to walk!"

Lidia glanced around nervously. Stephen was talking critically. Someone might be listening. They seemed alone, but people were always around: security on the hillsides, others out for walks. Burson might be there, blended with the scenery, a stony man hidden amongst the rocks. Stephen had a hard time understanding about Burson. "I can walk," she whispered fiercely.

"How many times have you broken a leg or an arm or a rib?"

"Not in a year." She was proud of it. She had learned to be careful.

Stephen laughed incredulously. "Do you know how many bones I've broken in my life?" He didn't wait for an answer. "None. Not a single bone. Never. Do you even remember what it's like to walk without worrying that you'll trip, or bump into someone? You're like glass."

Lidia shook her head and looked away. "I'm going to be star. Belari will float us on the markets."

"But you can't walk," Stephen said. His eyes had a pitying quality that made Lidia angry.

"I can too. And it's enough."

"But — "

"No!" Lidia shook her head. "Who are you to say what I do? Look what Belari does to you, but still you are loyal! I may have had surgeries, but at least I'm not her toy."

It was the only time Stephen became angry. For a moment the rage in his face made Lidia think he would strike her and break her bones. A part of her hoped he would, that he would release the terrible frustration brewing between them, two servants each calling the other slave.

Instead, Stephen mastered himself and gave up the argument. He apologized and held her hand and they were quiet as the Sun set, but it was already too late and their quiet time was ruined. Lidia's mind had gone back to the days before the surgeries, when she ran without care, and though she would not admit it to Stephen, it felt as though he had ripped away a scab and revealed an aching bitter wound.

The performance hall trembled with anticipation, a room full of people high on Tingle and champagne. The muslin on the walls flickered

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like lightning as Belari's guests, swathed in brilliant silks and sparkling gold, swirled through the room in colorful clouds of revelry, clumping together with conversation, then breaking apart with laughter as they made their social rounds.

Lidia slipped carefully amongst the guests, her pale skin and diaphanous shift a spot of simplicity amongst the gaudy colors and wealth. Some of the guests eyed her curiously, the strange girl threading through their pleasure. They quickly dismissed her. She was merely another creature of Belari's, intriguing to look at, perhaps, but of no account. Their attention always returned to the more important patterns of gossip and association swirling around them. Lidia smiled. Soon, she thought, you will recognize me. She slipped up against a wall, near a table piled high with finger sandwiches, small cuts of meat and plates of plump strawberries.

Lidia scanned the crowds. Her sister was there, across the room, dressed in an identical diaphanous shift. Belari stood surrounded by mediascape names and fief lieges, her green gown matching her eyes, smiling, apparently at ease, even without her newfound habit of body armor.

Vernon Weir slipped up behind Belari, stroking her shoulder. Lidia saw Belari shiver and steel herself against Weir's touch. She wondered how he could not notice. Perhaps he was one of those who took pleasure in the repulsion he inflicted. Belari smiled at him, her emotions under control once again.

Lidia took a small plate of meats from the table. The meat was drizzled with raspberry reduction and was sweet. Belari liked sweet things, like the strawberries she was eating now with the Pendant Entertainment executive at the far end of the table. The sweet addiction was another side effect of the Tingle.

Belari caught sight of Lidia and led Vernon Weir toward her. "Do you like the meat?" she asked, smiling slightly.

Lidia nodded, finishing carefully.

Belari's smile sharpened. "I'm not surprised. You have a taste for good ingredients." Her face was flushed with Tingle. Lidia was glad they were in public. When Belari took too much Tingle she hungered and became erratic. Once, Belari had crushed strawberries against her skin, making her pale flesh blush with the juice, and then, high with the erotic charge

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of overdose, she had forced Lidia's tongue to Nia's juice-stained flesh and Nia's tongue to hers, while Belari watched, pleased with the decadent performance.

Belari selected a strawberry and offered it to Lidia. "Here. Have one, but don't stain yourself. I want you perfect." Her eyes glistened with excitement. Lidia steeled herself against memory and accepted the berry.

Vernon studied Lidia. "She's yours?"

Belari smiled fondly. "One of my fluted girls."

Vernon knelt and studied Lidia more closely. "What unusual eyes you have."

Lidia ducked her head shyly.

Belari said, "I had them replaced."

"Replaced?" Vernon glanced up at her. "Not altered?"

Belari smiled. "We both know nothing that beautiful comes artificially." She reached down and stroked Lidia's pale blond hair, smiling with satisfaction at her creation. "When I got her, she had the most beautiful blue eyes. The color of the flowers you find here in the mountains in the summer." She shook her head. "I had them replaced. They were beautiful, but not the look I wished for."

Vernon stood up again. "She is striking. But not as beautiful as you."

Belari smiled cynically at Vernon. "Is that why you want me wired for TouchSense?"

Vernon shrugged. "It's a new market, Belari. With your response, you could be a star."

"I'm already a star."

Vernon smiled. "But Revitia is expensive."

"We always come back to that, don't we, Vernon?"

Vernon gave her a hard look. "I don't want to be at odds with you, Belari. You've been wonderful for us. Worth every penny of your reconstruction. I've never seen a finer actress. But this is Pendant, after all. You could have bought your stock a long time ago if you weren't so attached to immortality." He eyed Belari coldly. "If you want to be immortal, you will wire TouchSense. Already we're seeing massive acceptance in the marketplace. It's the future of entertainment."

"I'm an actress, not a marionette. I don't crave people inside my skin."

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Vernon shrugged. "We all pay a price for our celebrity. Where the markets move, we must follow. None of us is truly free." He looked at Belari meaningfully. "Certainly not if we want to live forever."

Belari smiled slyly. "Perhaps." She nodded at Lidia. "Run along. It's almost time." She turned back to Vernon. "There's something I'd like you to see."

STEPHEN GAVE HER the vial the day before he died. Lidia had asked what it was, a few amber drops in a vial no larger than her pinky. She had smiled at the gift, feeling playful, but Stephen had been serious.

"It's freedom," he said.

She shook her head, uncomprehending.

"If you ever choose, you control your life. You don't have to be Belari's pet."

"I'm not her pet."

He shook his head. "If you ever want escape," he held up the vial, "it's here." He handed it to her and closed her pale hand around the tiny bottle. It was handblown. Briefly, she wondered if it came from her parents' workshop. Stephen said, "We're small people here. Only people like Belari have control. In other places, other parts of the world, it's different. Little people still matter. But here," he smiled sadly, "all we have is our lives."

Comprehension dawned. She tried to pull away but Stephen held her firmly. "I'm not saying you want it now, but someday, perhaps you will. Perhaps you'll decide you don't want to cooperate with Belari anymore. No matter how many gifts she showers on you." He squeezed her hand gently. "It's quick. Almost painless." He looked into her eyes with the soft brown kindness that had always been there.

It was a gift of love, however misguided, and because she knew it would make him happy, she nodded and agreed to keep the vial and put it in her hidey-hole, just in case. She couldn't have known that he had already chosen his own death, that he would hunt Belari with a knife, and almost succeed.

No one noticed when the fluted girls took their places on the center dais. They were merely oddities, pale angels, entwined. Lidia put her

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mouth to her sister's throat, feeling her pulse threading rapidly under her white, white skin. It throbbed against her tongue as she sought out the tiny bore hole in her sister's body. She felt the wet touch of Nia's tongue on her own throat, nestling into her flesh like a small mouse seeking comfort.

Lidia stilled herself, waiting for the attention of the people, patient and focused on her performance. She felt Nia breathe, her lungs expanding inside the frail cage of her chest. Lidia took her own breath. They began to play, first her own notes, running out through unstopped keys in her flesh, and then Nia's notes beginning as well. The open sound, haunting moments of breath, pressed through their bodies.

The melancholy tones trailed off. Lidia moved her head, breathing in, mirroring Nia as she pressed her lips again to her sister's flesh. This time, Lidia kissed her sister's hand. Nia's mouth sought the delicate hollow of her clavicle. Music, mournful, as hollow as they were, breathed out from their bodies. Nia breathed into Lidia and the exhalation of her lungs slipped out through Lidia's bones, tinged with emotion, as though the warm air of her sister came to life within her body.

Around the girls, the guests fell quiet. The silence spread, like ripples from a stone thrown into a placid pool, speeding outward from their epicenter to lap at the farthest edges of the room. All eyes turned to the pale girls on stage. Lidia could feel their eyes, hungry, yearning, almost physical as their gazes pressed against her. She moved her hands beneath her sister's shift, clasping her close. Her sister's hands touched her hips, closing stops in her fluted body. At their new embrace a sigh of yearning came from the crowd, a whisper of their own hungers made musical.

Lidia's hands found the keys to her sister, her tongue touching Nia's throat once more. Her fingers ran along the knuckles of Nia's spine, finding the clarinet within her, stroking keys. She pressed the warm breath of herself into her sister and she felt Nia breathing into her. Nia's sound was dark and melancholy, her own tones, brighter, higher, ran in counterpoint, a slowly developing story of forbidden touch.

They stood embraced. Their body music built, notes intertwining seductively as their hands stroked one another's bodies, bringing forth a complex rising tide of sound. Suddenly, Nia wrenched at Lidia's shift and Lidia's fingers tore away Nia's own. They stood revealed, pale elfin

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creatures of music. The guests around them gasped as the notes poured out brighter now, unmuffled by clinging clothes. The girls' musical graftings shone: cobalt boreholes in their spines, glinting stops and keys made of brass and ivory that ran along their fluted frames and contained a hundred possible instruments within the structure of their bodies.

Nia's mouth crept up Lidia's arm. Notes spilled out of Lidia as bright as water jewels. Laments of desire and sin flowed from Nia's pores. Their embraces became more frenzied, a choreography of lust. The spectators pressed closer, incited by the spectacle of naked youth and music intertwined.

Around her, Lidia was vaguely aware of their watching eyes and flushed expressions. The Tingle and the performance were doing their work on the guests. She could feel the heat rising in the room. She and Nia sank slowly to the floor, their embraces becoming more erotic and elaborate, the sexual tension of their musical conflict increasing as they entwined. Years of training had come to this moment, this carefully constructed weave of harmonizing flesh.

We perform pornography, Lidia thought. Pornography for the profit of Belari. She caught a glimpse of her patron's gleaming pleasure, Vernon Weir dumbstruck beside her. Yes, she thought, look at us, Master Weir, look and see what pornography we perform, and then it was her turn to play upon her sister, and her tongue and hands stroked Nia's keys.

It was a dance of seduction and acquiescence. They had other dances, solos and duets, some chaste, others obscene, but for their debut, Belari had chosen this one. The energy of their music increased, violent, climactic, until at last she and Nia lay upon the floor, expended, sheathed in sweat, bare twins tangled in musical lasciviousness. Their body music fell silent.

Around them, no one moved. Lidia tasted salt on her sister's skin as they held their pose. The lights dimmed, signaling completion.

Applause exploded around them. The lights brightened. Nia drew herself upright. Her lips quirked in a smile of satisfaction as she helped Lidia to her feet. You see? Nia's eyes seemed to say. We will be stars. Lidia found herself smiling with her sister. Despite the loss of Stephen, despite Belari's depredations, she was smiling. The audience's adoration washed over her, a balm of pleasure.

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They curtsied to Belari as they had been trained, making obeisance first to their patron, the mother goddess who had created them. Belari smiled at the gesture, however scripted it was, and joined the applause of her guests. The people's applause increased again at the girls' good grace, then Nia and Lidia were curtseying to the corners of the compass, gathering their shifts and leaving the stage, guided by Burson's hulking presence to their patron.

The applause continued as they crossed the distance to Belari. Finally, at Belari's wave, the clapping gave way to respectful silence. She smiled at her assembled guests, placing her arms around the slight shoulders of the girls and said, "My lords and ladies, our Fluted Girls," and applause burst over them again, one final explosion of adulation before the guests fell to talking, fanning themselves, and feeling the flush of their own skins which the girls had inspired.

Belari held the fluted girls closely and whispered in their ears, "You did well." She hugged them carefully.

Vernon Weir's eyes roved over Lidia and Nia's exposed bodies. "You outdo yourself, Belari," he said.

Belari inclined her head slightly at the compliment. Her grip on Lidia's shoulder became proprietary. Belari's voice didn't betray her tension. She kept it light, comfortably satisfied with her position, but her fingers dug into Lidia's skin. "They are my finest."

"Such an extraordinary crafting."

"It's expensive when they break a bone. They're terribly fragile." Belari smiled down at the girls affectionately. "They hardly remember what it's like to walk without care."

"All the most beautiful things are fragile." Vernon touched Lidia's cheek. She forced herself not to flinch. "It must have been complex to build them."

Belari nodded. "They are intricate." She traced a finger along the boreholes in Nia's arm. "Each note isn't simply affected by the placement of fingers on keys; but also by how they press against one another, or the floor; if an arm is bent or if it is straightened. We froze their hormone levels so that they wouldn't grow, and then we began designing their instruments. It takes an enormous amount of skill for them to play and to dance."

"How long have you been training them?"

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"Five years. Seven if you count the surgeries that began the process."

Vernon shook his head. "And we never heard of them."

"You would have ruined them. I'm going to make them stars."

"We made you a star."

"And you'll unmake me as well, if I falter."

"So you'll float them on the markets?"

Belari smiled at him. "Of course. I'll retain a controlling interest, but the rest, I will sell."

"You'll be rich."

Belari smiled, "More than that, I'll be independent."

Vernon mimed elaborate disappointment. "I suppose this means we won't be wiring you for TouchSense."

"I suppose not."

The tension between them was palpable. Vernon, calculating, looking for an opening while Belari gripped her property and faced him. Vernon's eyes narrowed.

As though sensing his thoughts, Belari said, "I've insured them."

Vernon shook his head ruefully. "Belari, you do me a disservice." He sighed. "I suppose I should congratulate you. To have such loyal subjects, and such wealth, you've achieved more than I would have thought possible when we first met."

"My servants are loyal because I treat them well. They are happy to serve."

"Would your Stephen agree?" Vernon waved at the sweetmeats in the center of the refreshment table, drizzled with raspberry and garnished with bright green leaves of mint.

Belari smiled. "Oh yes, even him. Do you know that just as Michael and Renee were preparing to cook him, he looked at me and said 'Thank you'?" She shrugged. "He tried to kill me, but he did have the most eager urge to please, even so. At the very end, he told me he was sorry, and that the best years of his life had been in service to me." She wiped at a theatrical tear. "I don't know how it is, that he could love me so, and still so desire to have me dead." She looked away from Vernon, watching the other guests. "For that, though, I thought I would serve him, rather than simply stake him out as a warning. We loved each other, even if he was a traitor."

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Vernon shrugged sympathetically. "So many people dislike the fief structure. You try to tell them that you provide far more security than what existed before, and yet still they protest, and," he glanced meaningfully at Belari, "sometimes more."

Belari shrugged. "Well, my subjects don't protest. At least not until Stephen. They love me."

Vernon smiled. "As we all do. In any case, serving him chilled this way." He lifted a plate from the table. "Your taste is impeccable."

Lidia's face stiffened as she followed the conversation. She looked at the array of finely sliced meats and then at Vernon as he forked a bite into his mouth. Her stomach turned. Only her training let her remain still. Vernon and Belari's conversation continued, but all Lidia could think was that she had consumed her friend, the one who had been kind to her.

Anger trickled through her, filling her porous body with rebellion. She longed to attack her smug patron, but her rage was impotent. She was too weak to hurt Belari. Her bones were too fragile, her physique too delicate. Belari was strong in all things as she was weak. Lidia stood trembling with frustration, and then Stephen's voice whispered comforting wisdom inside her head. She could defeat Belari. Her pale skin flushed with pleasure at the thought.

As though sensing her, Belari looked down. "Lidia, go put on clothes and come back. I'll want to introduce you and your sister to everyone before we take you public."

LIDIA CREPT TOWARD her hidey-hole. The vial was still there, if Burson had not found it. Her heart hammered at the thought: that the vial might be missing, that Stephen's final gift had been destroyed by the monster. She slipped through dimly lit servant's tunnels to the kitchen, anxiety pulsing at every step.

The kitchen was busy, full of staff preparing new platters for the guests. Lidia's stomach turned. She wondered if more trays bore Stephen's remains. The stoves flared and the ovens roared as Lidia slipped through the confusion, a ghostly waif sliding along the walls. No one paid her attention. They were too busy laboring for Belari, doing her bidding

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without thought or conscience: slaves, truly. Obedience was all Belari cared for.

Lidia smiled grimly to herself. If obedience was what Belari loved, she was happy to provide a true betrayal. She would collapse on the floor, amongst her mistress's guests, destroying Belari's perfect moment, shaming her and foiling her hopes of independence.

The pantry was silent when Lidia slipped through its archway. Everyone was busy serving, running like dogs to feed Belari's brood. Lidia wandered amongst the stores, past casks of oil and sacks of onions, past the great humming freezers that held whole sides of beef within their steel bowels. She reached the broad tall shelves at the pantry's end and climbed past preserved peaches, tomatoes, and olives to the high-stored legumes. She pushed aside a vacuum jar of lentils and felt within.

For a moment, as she slid her hand around the cramped hiding place, she thought the vial was missing, but then her grasp closed on the tiny blown-glass bulb.

She climbed down, careful not to break any bones, laughing at herself as she did, thinking that it hardly mattered now, and hurried back through the kitchen, past the busy, obedient servants, and then down the servants' tunnels, intent on self-destruction.

As she sped through the darkened tunnels, she smiled, glad that she would never again steal through dim halls hidden from the view of aristocracy. Freedom was in her hands. For the first time in years she controlled her own fate.

Burson lunged from the shadows, his skin shifting from black to flesh as he materialized. He seized her and jerked her to a halt. Lidia's body strained at the abrupt capture. She gasped, her joints creaking. Burson gathered her wrists into a single massive fist. With his other hand, he turned her chin upward, subjecting her black eyes to the interrogation of his red-rimmed orbs. "Where are you going?"

His size could make you mistake him for stupid, she thought. His slow rumbling voice. His great animal-like gaze. But he was observant where Belari was not. Lidia trembled and cursed herself for foolishness. Burson studied her, his nostrils flaring at the scent of fear. His eyes watched the blush of her skin. "Where are you going?" he asked again. Warning laced his tone.

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"Back to the party," Lidia whispered.

"Where have you been?"

Lidia tried to shrug. "Nowhere. Changing."

"Nia is already there. You are late. Belari wondered about you."

Lidia said nothing. There was nothing she could say to make Burson lose his suspicions. She was terrified that he would pry open her clenched hands and discover the glass vial. The servants said it was impossible to lie to Burson. He discovered everything.

Burson eyed her silently, letting her betray herself. Finally he said, "You went to your hidey-hole." He sniffed at her. "Not in the kitchen, though. The pantry." He smiled, revealing hard sharp teeth. "High up."

Lidia held her breath. Burson couldn't let go of a problem until it was solved. It was bred into him. His eyes swept over her skin. "You're nervous." He sniffed. "Sweating. Fear."

Lidia shook her head stubbornly. The tiny vial in her hands was slick, she was afraid she would drop it, or move her hands and call attention to it. Burson's great strength pulled her until they were nose to nose. His fist squeezed her wrists until she thought they would shatter. He studied her eyes. "So afraid."

"No." Lidia shook her head again.

Burson laughed, contempt and pity in the sound. "It must be terrifying to know you can be broken, at any time." His stone grip relaxed. Blood rushed back into her wrists. "Have your hidey-hole, then. Your secret is safe with me."

For a moment, Lidia wasn't sure what he meant. She stood before the giant security officer, frozen still, but then Burson waved his hand irritably and slipped back into the shadows, his skin darkening as he disappeared. "Go."

Lidia stumbled away, her legs wavering, threatening to give out. She forced herself to keep moving, imagining Burson's eyes burning into her pale back. She wondered if he still watched her or if he had already lost interest in the harmless spindly fluted girl, Belari's animal who hid in the closets and made the staff hunt high and low for the selfish mite.

Lidia shook her head in wonderment. Burson had not seen. Burson, for all his enhancements, was blind, so accustomed to inspiring terror that he could no longer distinguish fear from guilt.

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* * *

A new gaggle of admirers swarmed around Belari, people who knew she was soon to be independent. Once the fluted girls floated on the market, Belari would be nearly as powerful as Vernon Weir, valuable not only for her own performances, but also for her stable of talent. Lidia moved to join her, the vial of liberation hidden in her fist.

Nia stood near Belari, talking to Claire Paranovis from SK Net. Nia nodded graciously at whatever the woman was saying, acting as Belari had trained them: always polite, never ruffled, always happy to talk, nothing to hide, but stories to tell. That was how you handled the media. If you kept them full, they never looked deeper. Nia looked comfortable in her role.

For a moment, Lidia felt a pang of regret at what she was about to do, then she was beside Belari, and Belari was smiling and introducing her to the men and women who surrounded her with fanatic affection. Mgumi Story. Kim Song Lee. Maria Blyst. Takashi Ghandi. More and more names, the global fraternity of media elites.

Lidia smiled and bowed while Belari fended off their proffered hands of congratulation, protecting her delicate investment. Lidia performed as she had been trained, but in her hand the vial lay sweaty, a small jewel of power and destiny. Stephen had been right. The small only controlled their own termination, sometimes not even that. Lidia watched the guests take slices of Stephen, commenting on his sweetness. Sometimes, not even that.

She turned from the crowd of admirers and drew a strawberry from the pyramids of fruit on the refreshment table. She dipped it in cream and rolled it in sugar, tasting the mingled flavors. She selected another strawberry, red and tender between her spidery fingers, a sweet medium for a bitter freedom earned.

With her thumb, she popped the tiny cork out of the vial and sprinkled amber jewels on the lush berry. She wondered if it would hurt, or if it would be quick. It hardly mattered, soon she would be free. She would cry out and fall to the floor and the guests would step back, stunned at Belari's loss. Belari would be humiliated, and more important, would lose the value of the fluted twins. Vernon Weir's lecherous hands would hold her once again.

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Lidia gazed at the tainted strawberry. Sweet, Lidia thought. Death should be sweet. She saw Belari watching her, smiling fondly, no doubt happy to see another as addicted to sweets as she. Lidia smiled inwardly, pleased that Belari would see the moment of her rebellion. She raised the strawberry to her lips.

Suddenly a new inspiration whispered in her ear.

An inch from death, Lidia paused, then turned and held out the strawberry to her patron.

She offered the berry as obeisance, with the humility of a creature utterly owned. She bowed her head and proffered the strawberry in the palm of her pale hand, bringing forth all her skill, playing the loyal servant desperately eager to please. She held her breath, no longer aware of the room around her. The guests and conversations all had disappeared. Everything had gone silent.

There was only Belari and the strawberry and the frozen moment of delicious possibility.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Feesters in the Lake & Other Stories, by Bob Leman, Midnight House, 2002, $40.

REGULAR readers of this magazine should recognize Bob Leman's name, and probably some of these stories as well, since all the material collected here initially ran in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* between 1969 and 1988, except for "Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming" (which first appeared in *Shadows 10*) and "How Dobbstown Was Saved" (which is original to this book).

These stories also make up the complete works of Leman, who, after writing fifteen stories over three decades, decided "whatever creative spark I had for a while just went away," and stopped writing. And that's a real shame because, for the most part, these stories are equal to the output of any of the great masters of our field.

There are a few elements that might not engage a reader more accustomed to contemporary fictional styles, particularly Leman's penchant for writing from an omnipresent point of view. It's an old style of writing, and certainly a valid one, but that distancing of the narrator — be it in first person or third — can make the story feel stiff. The modern reader is used to being inside a character's head and only knowing what the character knows. Direct authorial asides to the readers can be jarring, but personally I enjoyed them.

There are also a few stories which are basically extended jokes, such as the Mad Scientist exercise that drives "How Dobbstown Was Saved."

But those are small carps when set against the bulk of the collection's stories. The prose is carefully considered, flowing stately and sure. The strange array of characters and creatures is endlessly fascinating, begging for their stories to be reread, simply for a repeat enjoyment

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of both their truthful portraits and their oddities. And the ideas and speculations show more imagination in a few thousand words than do many contemporary novels.

No matter what subject Leman turns his attention to, he brings a new and thoughtful — and, yes, sometimes amusing — perspective: from parallel worlds (the stunning "Window") and vampires ("The Pilgrimage of Clifford M." is easily one of the best takes I've run across yet, fascinating and tragic) to time travel and the paradoxes alternate time lines can create ("Loob"). But the highlight of the book for me is the title story, a creepy tale that takes a pulp era concept and makes of it high art.

Physically, this is a beautifully produced book, with a sewn binding, nice heavy stock, and a lovely design. The cover's rather ugly, but I like it for how it reminds me of the old semi-pro zines such as *Whispers* and *Weirdbook*, and Leman's stories certainly echo the feel of the material those magazines published.

One last note: I recommend that you skip Jim Rockhill's introduction until you've actually read the stories. It's not so much the prose is so dry, which it is, as that in his discussion of the stories he gives away too many elements that will be more enjoyable when you come across them in the context of the actual story first. The introduction should have been an afterword.

But do read Leman's short and heartfelt preface.

By the Light of the Moon, by Dean Koontz, Bantam Books, 2002, $26.95.

I'll admit to a small disappointment when I realized that, for the third year in a row, the latest Koontz novel still doesn't complete the story he started in *Fear Nothing* (1998) and *Seize the Night* (1999). But that disappointment lasted only so long as it took me to turn to the first page and begin reading.

By the Light of the Moon starts with yet another wonderful Koontz setup. This time out, Dylan O'Conner, an artist on his way to an arts festival in Santa Fe, and his autistic brother, Shep, are attacked by a mild-mannered "doctor" who injects them with a mysterious substance that, Dylan is told, will either kill them or transform them into something remarkable and perhaps more than human. And, oh yes, some very nasty men will want to kill them in an attempt to eradicate every trace of the doctor and "his work."

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A chance encounter outside their room with the doctor puts an up-and-coming comedian named Jillian Jackson in the same predicament, and very soon the three of them are fleeing the doctor's enemies. They also have to deal with effects of the mysterious substance with which they've been injected. These two needs end up colliding in a fast-paced, smart novel that takes them all the way from their troubled present into the tragedies of their pasts.

Although there are often fantastical elements in Koontz's novels, they are usually based firmly on speculations from the cutting edge of contemporary science. This time out he's tackling nanotechnology and posits a fascinating array of theories on the subject.

There are many things to appreciate at the end of the year, and one of the main ones for me is the publication of a new Koontz novel. Koontz gives us characters with breadth and heart, in prose that is always polished. He's not afraid to mix humor with the action sequences and the more serious elements of the story, and his character dialogue, while far more graceful and articulate than any you'll hear in life around you, doesn't detract from the believability of his characters. Instead, it adds to the joy of the reading experience, as much as does that impeccable prose of his.

Floodwater, by Heather Shaw &Tim Pratt, Tropism Press, 2002, $4.

This is a nice introduction to the work of two authors, and cleverly presented: a collaboration between the two is bookended by a solo story from each author.

Heather Shaw starts the proceedings with "Wetting the Bed," a strange, surreal take on the Peter Pan myth. It opens with "When the floods came, all us kids climbed into our beds...." The floods take the beds away and the children make rafts by lashing a number of beds together. Adults don't survive the floods and when children get too old, their beds sink, taking them down as well. It's an odd little story, but fascinating for how much Shaw manages to fit into it and where she takes us as it unfolds.

The collaboration, "A Serious Case of Fairies," is the longest of the three stories collected here, and certainly entertaining, but it's more like a sustained joke, complete with a punch line ending.

Far more resonant is the third piece, Tim Pratt's solo outing. While

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"The Heart, a Chambered Nautilus" is another short-short, it packs a lot into its length, depicting a meeting between a woman and a strange man who steps out of a vending machine, "unfolding before her like a Japanese fan." Here, the pleasure is in Pratt's language and in the payoff at the story's end — expected, but no less appealing for that.

For more information on Tropism Press, contact them at: P.O. Box 13222, Berkeley, CA 94712-4222, or on the web at: www.sff.net/people/timpratt/press.html.

Spectrum 9, edited by Cathy Fenner & Arnie Fenner, Underwood Books, 2002, $27.

It's January as I write this and already the awards season has started, with Dick Clark's *American Music Awards* leading the way. It's also the time when we're seeing the tail-end of the "best of the year" lists in magazines (which conveniently ignore anything that was released in December) and the various "year's best" publications begin to roll off the presses.

One of the first to appear each year is the Fenners' *Spectrum*, which collects samples of art from the past year, produced by a juried selection of the top contemporary fantastic artists of 2002. The production values are always top-notch — heavy, slick paper, rich colors — and the choice eclectic, ranging from the weird and strange to works of great and luminous beauty.

Arnie Fenner provides a solid overview of the year, and there's a one-page bio of this year's grand master award recipient, Kinuko Y. Craft, that faces a stunning reproduction of one of her paintings.

Do you need this for your own library? Not necessarily. But if you don't get it, you'll miss one of the best visual treats that your eyes could experience this year.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Lucky Wander Boy, by D. B. Weiss, Plume, 2003, $13.

The Poison Master, by Liz WIlliams, Bantam, 2003, $5.99.

"Jon," by George Saunders, *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2003.

Geek Love

I HAVE seldom had as much trouble getting into a book as I had with D. B. Weiss's first novel, *Lucky Wander Boy*. Its opening chapters form a compendium of tics associated with late-century postmodernism and Hysterical Realism: quotes from imaginary texts, lists, a book-within-a-book, here titled the *Catalogue of Obsolete Entertainments*; footnotes, and cutesy authorial intrusions with subtitles like "Why Anya's anger was already primed" and "The irony of it all;" the last straw, a disaffected slacker narrator so relentless and annoying that I threw Weiss's book across the room in disgust four times — a record!

And yet, and yet...I kept picking the damn thing back up again. Like a precocious geek who refuses to be rebuffed in his efforts to pick up girls, *Lucky Wander Boy* takes a licking and keeps on ticking. Weiss's annoying narrator, Adam Pennyman, doesn't exactly grow less annoying as the novel progresses. Instead he does something more interesting: through sheer force of will, he converts you to seriously considering and ultimately sharing his passion, which is for classic 1980s video games like Donkey Kong, Pac-Man, Asteroids, Space Invaders, et al.

I'll admit, these days, I spend as much time yelling at my kids to stop playing computer games as I did playing Missile Control and Asteroids twenty years ago. And I never even realized I missed Galaxian until I found it in Adam

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Pennyman's Index for the *Catalogue of Obsolete Entertainments*. Actually, I'd never really thought of myself as a true geek until I read this book — okay, I was in denial — and even then there were a few scary moments when I feared I might merely be a geek remora, one of Weiss's disdained cultivators of geek chic.

But, no. Once I got to the *Catalogue of Obsolete Entertainments* Supplementary Essay: "On Geeks," I was no longer in denial: for Lo! I passed the test. Not only that, I was a convert to Weiss's vision. I was hooked on *Lucky Wander Boy*.

Adam Pennyman is twenty-ish, smart-ish, cute-ish; either a borderline sociopath or a pretty normal guy, depending on circumstances. Adam has a convincing and very funny Gnostic interpretation of Donkey Kong, complete with sober footnotes on *The Matrix*. He also believes that, as a boy, he nearly saved his grandmother from cancer by beating Intellivision's Microsurgeon game in his basement rec room. When the Intellivision breaks, Grammy dies. "If the Intellivision had been fixed sooner — a week, a day, an hour — I could have saved her."

And so Adam grows up, sort of.

In the spring of 1999, several years out of college, I found myself out of work, fired from my job as script researcher on a movie entitled *Viking!* It did not bother me much, being let go. The movie was guaranteed straight-to-video. I had been fired from better jobs.

Shortly after my dismissal — effective immediately upon notification, with a severance package of one *Viking!* T-shirt and two refrigerator magnets — I inadvertently came upon a job prospect on the Internet, which was ironic, as I had been pretending to search for one while catching up on movie reviews and current events.

Adam lies his way into his next job, with an American video production company called Cattle Raid, based in Warsaw. He lies his way into a beautiful Polish girlfriend as well, but his true love remains the video games of his childhood, and once a friend turns him on to a software program known as MAME, for Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator, Adam is a doomed man. He downloads every game he ever loved, and it's not so much Game Over, Dude, as Life Over — "when Jeffrey slid that laptop over, I fell

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into a screen, and in a very real way I never quite climbed out again."

Lucky Wander Boy is Adam's account of life inside that black hole, centering on his great obsession: the legendary (and imaginary) arcade game called Lucky Wander Boy, designed by "the only female game designer of note in early '80s Japan, and perhaps its only female entrepreneur as well." Through luck — or is it fate? — Adam is fired from Cattle Raid, but soon gets a job at Portal Development and Entertainment, a cheesy production company in Santa Monica. Portal is run by the odious Kurt Krickstein, just one of the hilariously and savagely depicted support characters in Weiss's Wonderland; among the many properties Krickstein has acquired is a movie option on *Lucky Wander Boy*. When someone suggests allowing the option to lapse, Krickstein cries, "No!...Diversity is a very important part of the Portal brand identity. We have a diversified portfolio of intellectual properties, and this one fills our 'weird cult geek bullshit' quota." Adam thinks Krickstein has hired him to work on the screenplay for LWB, but at first all Pennyman does is write (or rather, avoid writing) descriptions of Portal's various online sites. These include:

1) Alien Bimbo Range: one of these hot bikini chicks is really a bloodsucking alien — can you find out which one and blow her away before she drains you dry? A cool new online game from Portal!

8) Taco Stand: 'Watch that taco, Paco!' You've always wondered what goes on behind the counter at your local taqueria. Now you can find out, in this hilarious, edgy new web show from Portal Entertainment!

When the option on LWB is due to expire, Krickstein hopes Adam can act as intermediary between Portal and Araki Itachi, Lucky Wander Boy's creator. This is the point at which Adam's life spins seriously out of control, as it appears to take on the levels, obstacles, and dimensions of a game of Lucky Wander Boy.

Lucky Wander Boy the novel has myriad antecedents: there are echoes of *Repo Man*, Bruce Bethke's 1983 story "Cyberpunk," *Being John Malkovich*, *High Fidelity*, *Ghost World* — just about any geeky guy/gal story you can think of. But its clearest influence is Frederick Exley's fictionalized memoir *A Fan's Notes*, still the funniest, most

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frightening, and moving account of "that long malaise," a writer's life, ever penned (one of the greatest arguments for sobriety as well). Exley's obsession was twofold, with alcohol and the New York Giants, and he wrote of both with an eloquence that Weiss has clearly absorbed.

> Why did football bring me so to life?...It had that kind of power over me, drawing me back with the force of something known, scarcely remembered, elusive as integrity — perhaps it was no more than the force of a forgotten childhood. Whatever it was, I gave myself up to the Giants utterly. The recompense I gained was the feeling of being alive....
>
> Unlike some men, I had never drunk for boldness or charm or wit; I had used alcohol for precisely what it was, a depressant to check the mental exhilaration produced by excessive sobriety.

> When I put a quarter into an arcade machine or call up an emulated game on my computer, I do it to escape the world that is a slave to the time that makes things fall apart. I have never played these games to occupy *my* world.

I wonder how much of D. B. Weiss's target audience — presumably clever people his own age, which seems to be Adam Pennyman's — will have read Fred Exley. I hope a lot of them have. Probably it doesn't matter, except for this: *A Fan's Notes* was a touchstone for an earlier generation. *Lucky Wander Boy* may just turn out to be the same for another one. It's a lovely, funny, sad book. I'm glad I stuck with it.

The opening pages of Liz Williams's *The Poison Master* were a walk in the park compared to those of *Lucky Wander Boy*, but the walk turned out to be a long one. *The Poison Master* is an elegant, finely constructed science fantasy that deftly interweaves Elizabethan alchemist John Dee's life with that of Alivet Dee. Alivet is also an alchemist, on a planet called Latent Emanation. Latent Emanation is ruled by a malevolent alien species that the planet's human inhabitants call the Lords of Night; these dark Lords have taken Alivet's twin sister as a bond-servant. The Poison Master Ghairen is

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from yet another planet, Hathes; he coerces Alivet into leaving Latent Emanation and journeying with him to his home world, where he hopes to develop a means of overthrowing the Lords of Night. There is much intrigue and counter intrigue, along with dense, gracefully written descriptions of marvels: hallucinogenic tours-de-force that sweep from world to world, with occasional side trips back to sixteenth-century England and Europe. Williams acknowledges the influence of an unlikely trinity — Jane Austen, William Burroughs, and Jack Vance — and there are indeed flashes of Austen's romantic touch, along with the more obvious tips of the hat to Burroughs in the drug fantasias, Vance in the dizzyingly colorful wordplay between worlds, as well as glimpses of Viriconium and Urth. Williams's major flaw is a relatively minor one: an excess of description that slows the novel's pace to a crawl for much of the middle section. Still, most of her joy in her own fabulous creation is transferred to the reader: *The Poison Master* is a kaleidoscope in which our own world is transformed into a place of strange irradiated beauty.

Finally, the best science fiction story I have read in many years is George Saunders's "Jon," recently published in *The New Yorker*. Saunders, a longtime contributor to that magazine, is the author of two story collections, *Pastoralia* and *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, as well as a recent children's book, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Fripp*. His stories tend to be black, funny riffs on pop culture, sweetened by earnestly well-intentioned characters who aren't exactly redeemed by their failures, but manage to endear themselves to readers all the same. "Jon" presents a near-future so awful and believable, it's as though Saunders were sending back missives from the trenches. Attractive young people are forced to undergo neural surgery so that they are fed a constant barrage of commercial media images, which they rate for their various sponsors, all while living in a state of seemingly benign house arrest. Saunders's genius lies in how he renders this stream of corporate consciousness, which becomes language, prophecy, and dream for its adolescent conduits, while at the same time demonstrating his young protagonist's terror and yearning as he begins to sense the vast, inexplicable world he is unable to experience because of his altered neurology.

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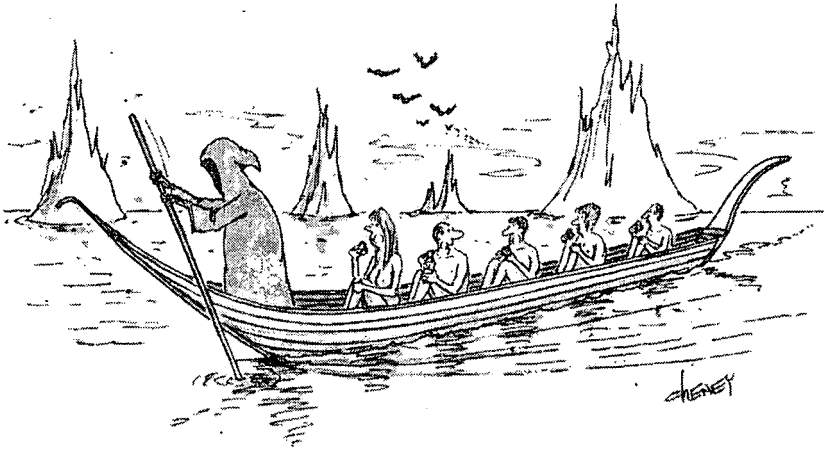
...what will it be like for us when all has been taken from us? Of what will we speak? I do not want to only speak of my love in grunts!... I want to possess all the articulate I can, because otherwise there we will be, in non-designer clothes, no longer even on TrendSetters & TasteMakers gum cards with our photos on them, and I will turn to her and say, Honey, uh, honey there is a certain feeling but I cannot name it and cannot cite a precedent-type feeling, but trust me, dearest, wow, do I ever feel it for you, right now. And what will that be like, that stupid standing there, just a man and a woman and the wind, and nobody knowing what nobody is meaning?

If we are not able to articulate our own experience of the world, others will do so for us, with disastrous results; this is the terrible message behind some of the greatest works of science fiction of the last century — Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*; Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*; George Orwell's *1984*. George Saunders has found a new way of expressing this old, dire warning. It's a message that can't be repeated enough. ⅁



"The sticky buns were a nice surprise."

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Bill Vaughan's first contribution to F&SF *was "The Wall" back in September of 1994. Sadly, his second story is his last—Mr. Vaughan died of cancer in 2002 at the age of 59. As a writer, he studied with Marta Randall and belonged to the Rogue workshop that splintered off after the class. His stories appeared in* Analog *and* Writers of the Future. *He was a software writer by trade and a beer drinker by avocation with a fondness for home brews (especially sour-mash stout). A devoted student of Middle Eastern drumming, he was widely traveled but for "Mabiba Overboard" he stuck to the US—although the "U" in "US" is less relevant than it used to be...*

Mabiba Overboard

By Bill Vaughan

TELL US A STORY, GRANNIE....

There once was a woman, and her name was Zulaika. She wasn't too young and she wasn't too old, and she lived in Florida with her friend Mabiba. Florida — it had been a big state once. Now, though the rising sea hadn't yet made off with it entirely, there wasn't a lot of Florida left.

But there was a lot of ocean. It was shallow ocean, good for fish, and crabs, if you knew where to catch them so they weren't toxic.

Mabiba and Zulaika made their living catching stuff. Fish and crabs mostly, but there was other stuff to catch too, stuff that could make you rich if no one saw you catch it.

One day they were fishing near a sunken town called Melbourne. It was on what used to be the coast of Florida, but it was way out to sea now, and it took most of a day for Mabiba and Zulaika to get there from New Jax in *Sadie*.

Sadie was their little boat. She wasn't much — an old cabin cruiser, converted into a fishing boat. She had a little cabin with two berths and a head.

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It was a nice day. Spring or early summer, not hurricane season yet. The sun was on the water, and the water was smooth and clear. You could nearly see down to the bottom — maybe forty, fifty feet in those days. Nowadays you couldn't dive there without scuba; it's much too deep.

In those days, you couldn't dive with scuba. It was illegal. You could go to jail for possession of scuba gear. Or if they found an air compressor on your boat.

Now when Zulaika was a little girl, she had read in a book all about *ama* divers — Japanese shellfish divers who lived long ago, before scuba was invented. They dived for oysters in deep water, sixty feet or more. Only women could do it — men didn't have enough stamina, or maybe they just weren't buoyant enough. The book didn't say.

Zulaika thought that was great, something the boys couldn't do, and she taught herself how to dive like the *ama*. And when she grew up, she taught her friend Mabiba, and they used to go out and dive for stuff.

Just one at a time could dive, and this time it was Zulaika's turn. She took a big stone and set it on the transom. That stone was tied onto the boat by a great long rope, longer than the distance to the bottom.

She put on her goggles, little ones that pushed into her eye sockets so the pressure wouldn't pop her eyes out. She tied a safety line around her waist. Then she breathed — huff, puff, huff, puff — until she felt like she was going to faint, and when her face got all red and she felt dizzy, she grabbed the big stone and just fell, right into the water.

The stone carried her down and down, and her head hurt, and she swallowed real fast so her eardrums wouldn't break, and the water pushed her chest in, and pushed the goggles into her eyes, and sooner than you could think it, she was on the bottom.

Now here's where a real *ama* diver would start to cut oysters and put them in her basket, but not Zulaika. Instead, she swam into a little drowned store. It was a jewelry store, and it still had stuff in it. Fish and crabs have no use for jewelry, so Zulaika and Mabiba were cleaning it out, a little bit at a time.

Zulaika had just enough time to swim in, get some stuff, swim back to the stone, and pull on the rope. Then Mabiba hauled her up, faster than she could swim, and her ears popped and her chest puffed out, and she blew out her breath *phoooo!* and she was on the surface.

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She climbed up the boarding ladder before she even got her breath back. "Look," she said to Mabiba. "Gold coins."

"Where did you find them?" Mabiba asked. "I thought we had the whole place cleaned out."

"Safe." Zulaika was still breathing hard.

"But.... How'd you get it open?"

"Not that safe. Another one. Little. Under the counter — I tried the handle, it popped right open. I got these coins. Might be something else in there. I was out of air."

"My turn to dive," said Mabiba. "I'll check it out."

Down went Mabiba, and Zulaika counted the seconds as she waited to feel the tug on the rope.

It was dangerous, *ama* diving. Just the air in your lungs — If Mabiba got hurt or stuck, she would drown unless Zulaika could pull her up by her safety line. But even the safety line was dangerous. It could get fouled on something, hold you on the bottom. So the women carried big knives to cut the line if something went wrong. And sometimes, things did go wrong. So far, they'd been lucky, but some day their luck was bound to run out.

So Zulaika's heart would pound when her friend Mabiba was below. And now her heart was pounding even harder, because as she waited for Mabiba, she saw a vessel approaching.

Any vessel at all was bad news. In the shipping lanes, the freighters and tankers would run you down without even looking, and further offshore there were pirates. Inshore, the other fishermen and crabbers would poach on your territory, cut your nets and steal your traps. And then there was the worst trouble of all — the Florida State Marine Police.

This time, sure enough, it was the police. And Mabiba was still below, and by the time Zulaika had hauled her up, the police boat had pulled alongside.

Three policemen they were, in a motor skiff. A good-sized twin-screw motor skiff, could make forty knots, maybe. Twice as fast as *Sadie*, for sure.

One of the police — he looked like the boss — pulled out a bull horn. "You niggers can't dive here. This is a restricted area."

Nobody used that word anymore, not even in those days. That

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policeman might have been trying to talk tough, but it came out sounding funny—like out of the last century. But Mabiba and Zulaika didn't laugh. That man was holding a big twelve-gauge shotgun, and they didn't want to make him mad.

"What you gals doin'?" he said. "You all fishin' in state waters without payin' your license, I bet."

"Need no license to fish in the ocean," Mabiba said.

"Shows what you know. By Florida state law, this here's dry land. You all need a license." The man held up some antique map that showed Florida sticking way out into the ocean.

"It's okay, officer," said Zulaika. "Our license is up to date. We do plenty of 'dry-land' fishing." She went into *Sadie*'s little cabin and brought out the license to show him.

"Not okay nohow," said the policeman. "License or not, you can't dive on dry land. Maybe you looters. Maybe you got contraband on board, maybe scubas. We going to board your boat, search your ass. You turn out to be looters — well, you know what we do to looters."

"Got no scuba," said Mabiba. "And the water's too deep to skindive, you can see that."

"What you doin' in the water, then, sweet lips? You all wet. No wet T-shirt contests out here."

The other policemen guffawed. One of them grabbed the bull horn and said, "You wouldn't win no prize neither."

"Trying to fix our prop shaft," Zulaika said. "It's fouled. We ran into somebody's floating line, got to cut it all away."

"Maybe so, maybe no," said the boss policeman, retrieving the bull horn. "Maybe you just fixin' your boat, maybe you looters. We comin' on board to see. Pat, Buddy, you board these gals' boat, you search everywhere, I mean everywhere." He pointed the shotgun at Mabiba and Zulaika and held it there while he pulled the police boat alongside and the other two men jumped down onto *Sadie*'s deck.

Those two policemen were called Patrick and Buddy. They had these cute little oval embroidered name badges, just like at the gas station. Patrick was tall and ugly, and Buddy was fat and ugly. And they had ugly manners to match. First thing when they got into the boat, Buddy tripped over that big stone and almost went sprawling.

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"What's this big rock doing here for people to trip over?" he yelled. He said some other stuff too, called that rock a bunch of names and all.

"Hey, you watch what you say about our boat anchor," said Zulaika. "Holds real good, specially in the mud."

"God, you sluts can't even afford a real anchor," said Buddy.

Patrick, he just laughed.

The two of them searched *Sadie* stem to stern, high and low, and no scuba did they find. No treasure either, because Zulaika, when she went into the little cabin, had hidden it pretty well.

The policemen weren't too happy to find nothing. Buddy allowed as how there was always some violation to bust a body on, so they started to count up life jackets and all. But everything was okay. Patrick hollered back to the police boat that they had come up dry and asked for advice.

Mr. Bull Horn, he said, "How about the crab pots?"

"Nothin' but crabs," said Buddy.

"Ice chests?"

"Just a few fish. Little ones."

"How about the head? Maybe they hidin' drugs in it."

So Patrick marched into the cabin and pulled aside the curtain. He looked at the head and raised the lid. "Phew. Don't you gals ever clean this thing?"

"Sometimes," said Zulaika.

Patrick eyed the head. He didn't look like he wanted to reach in there — I guess he'd rather reach into a barrel of water moccasins. "Tell you what," he said. "This here toilet discharge over the side?"

"It does," said Zulaika. "Ocean discharge is legal this far from shore, and I don't mean that phony shoreline of yours."

"That's true, little gal," said Patrick. "Maybe we going to follow you all the way to New Jax harbor, make sure you don't shit in our clean water there. But that's not what I had in mind. I guess I need to take a whizz." He unzipped his pants and peed in the toilet, right in front of Zulaika. Didn't put the seat up neither, and wasn't any too careful about where he went. Then he pumped the head and flushed it, pumped the head and flushed it, pumped the head and flushed it.

"There," he said. "If there was anything in that shit-pot, it's back on the bottom now."

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"Couldn't have been anything," said Zulaika. "It would have clogged the pump. Look at the sign." A sign over the head said,

PUT NOTHING IN THIS HEAD
UNLESS YOU HAVE EATEN IT FIRST.

Well, this Patrick, he just stood there and said, "You see something you like, little gal?" Then he put his weenie back in his pants. Zulaika might have said a lot of things, but she didn't. Didn't want to make that policeman angry. She was just glad it was her in the cabin instead of Mabiba. No telling what Mabiba might have done — she had a temper on her.

Patrick and Zulaika came out of the cabin, and Patrick hollered back to the police boat, "I didn't find nothin'. These gals are clean."

"That so?" said Mr. Bull Horn. "I saw you go in the cabin with that gal there, the one with the tits. You search her good?" Buddy the policeman laughed.

"Fuck you," said Mabiba. "I seen that pencil dick of yours. You couldn't search nothing with that."

"Jesus, Mabiba," said Zulaika, "you didn't have to say that." But Patrick was turning red, and he was mad.

"I think I'm going to check their story," he said, and he shucked his jacket and shoes and dove right overboard.

"Oh, hell," said Zulaika, and jumped right in after him.

Sure enough, Patrick hadn't spent much time looking at the prop shaft before he saw the little sack hanging by a line from the head's discharge outlet. He swam for it, but Zulaika was faster. She snatched the sack, cut the line with her big knife, and swam for the boarding ladder. She reached it first, scrambled up, and pulled it up behind her.

Buddy was a little slow to get the picture, but when he did, he went for Mabiba. That was a mistake. She grabbed the nearest crab pot and heaved the crabs right in his face, and while he was off his balance, she shoved him overboard.

Zulaika fired up the engine and pushed the throttle down. *Sadie* shot off as fast as she could go. The boss cop dropped his bull horn and fired his shotgun, but the women fell to the deck and the pellets missed them both.

After a couple of minutes, Zulaika put her head up. The police boat

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was still dead in the water, and Buddy and Patrick were just beginning to climb on board. Zulaika changed course, and they headed off shore, for international waters.

The police boat began to follow them. It put its bow up in the air and kicked up a dreadful spray.

"I don't think we'll get there before they catch us," said Mabiba. "I better get the bottles."

"You do that," said Zulaika. "But wait till they get nearby. Don't worry about that shotgun; they can't fire at us through their own bow. Hell, they can't hardly see us."

Mabiba reached down in the lazarette and pulled out a couple of empty Coke bottles. They had stoppers on them, and they were connected together with several meters of rigging wire. As the police boat approached, Mabiba stood on the afterdeck, whirling one of the bottles around her head. It made a noise — a deep humming roar — you could even hear it over the engines.

The police boat got close and changed course as if to pull alongside. As it turned, Zulaika could see the boss cop, standing up on the foredeck and trying to get a bead on them with his shotgun. He fired at them as Mabiba threw the bottles.

A few pellets rattled on *Sadie*'s deck, but Mabiba and Zulaika were unharmed. The police boat came closer. The bottles bobbed in the water on either side of its path. The cop took aim again.

Then came a terrible screeching noise, and the police boat began to run in tight, fast circles. The boss cop was thrown off the foredeck, shotgun flying.

"Got him!" shouted Mabiba.

"Yes!" yelled Zulaika.

The police boat had run between the bottles and the rigging wire had fouled one of its screws, maybe ripped it right off. With any luck, *Sadie* would be in international waters before the police boat could get under way.

"Hey," said Mabiba. "How'd you like the work I did on that head pump? Passed that sack slicker'n — well, near as slick as shit, anyways."

Half an hour later, they had reached the twelve-mile limit. That limit was measured from the old coastline, by international law. You see, all

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those countries that had lost territory still claimed it, just like the state of Florida, and kept up the pretense that it was really dry land.

But when Zulaika and Mabiba got to that limit, they found a problem. Lined up there, neat as you please, were half a dozen small boats. Each one had a crew of two, and Zulaika knew they were well-armed, because the boats were flying the Bahamian flag. They were pirates.

The Bahamas was a country made entirely of little islands off the Florida coast. Nothing was left of it — no dry land at all. But legally it still had boundaries and a jurisdiction.

And it still had inhabitants, and a government. They lived on board mother ships — huge vessels permanently moored where the islands used to be. Each mother ship had hundreds of small boats, which it would send out to rob, and steal, and harass shipping.

I don't know whether the Bahamian pirates were in league with the Florida State Marine Police. Maybe they had just been listening to the police radios. But there they were, positioned outside the twelve-mile limit just as nice as GPS could position them.

And while Zulaika and Mabiba were trying to calculate what to do, they heard something in the distance. When they looked through the binoculars, they saw it was the marine police.

That police boat wasn't going as fast as it had been, and it seemed to be slewing to port. The policemen had probably removed the port screw and shut down its engine. They wouldn't be able to run the starboard engine at full power and still steer, but they were still faster than *Sadie*.

Mabiba let out a Mayday on the radio, mentioning the pirates but not the police, who might have been even more dangerous. Zulaika pushed *Sadie* a little harder, heading straight north, away from the police, trying to turn it into a stern chase.

"Jesus, babe," said Mabiba. "We can't make it to Georgia before they catch us. No way."

"Got to try," said Zulaika. "We can't just give up. Not while we have fuel."

"What about the pirates? Maybe we'd be better off...."

"Don't you believe it, girl. They'll kill us first and ask questions later. That's if we're lucky."

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"You think those police won't do it and blame it on the pirates? I saw that man — he had murder in his eye. Or rape."

"Well, then, we just have to try for Georgia, don't we? You get back on the radio and keep sending those Maydays. Maybe we'll attract something else. Even another police boat would be good. They wouldn't dare harm us if someone could see."

"I don't know," said Mabiba. "Those Florida state police can be mean."

So the chase went on. Bit by bit the police boat approached *Sadie*. Pretty soon they were close enough to hear the bull horn. And what they heard encouraged them to go a little faster. If only they could.

The pirates, in their fast outboards, kept alongside easily, always staying just outside the twelve-mile limit. One of the pirates, a tall muscular woman, picked up her own bull horn.

"Come out hyah," she shouted with a heavy accent. "De po-lice no follow. You be safe wid us." She laughed cruelly.

"What are they afraid of?" asked Mabiba. "Why don't they just come in and get us?"

"I don't know," said Zulaika. "Maybe the police. But maybe — just maybe — it's that."

Over the northern horizon came a vessel. Big, fast, it wasn't a freighter — it looked like a warship. It was grayish, but might have been white once, with a big red or orange stripe on the hull. An unfamiliar flag flew from its flagstaff.

"This is the United States Coast Guard," said a booming voice. "Stand down and prepare for boarding."

The pirates turned and fled at full speed. Zulaika pulled back on the throttle and *Sadie* slowly came to a stop. The Florida police boat limped up. "Those are our pris'ners," said the boss cop. "Thanks for stopping them. We'll take them now."

"I guess not," came the voice from the Coast Guard cutter. "These are Federal waters. You get back inside the three-mile limit where you belong."

"Fuck, no," said the cop. "You Fed'rals, you got no police powers, you got nothing. They took all that shit away from you fifty years ago. States' rights, asshole."

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"We still have power in Federal waters," said the cutter. "This is our prize. You contest it and we'll sink your cracker ass."

"Like hell. Didn't you never hear of hot pursuit? I'll just radio back to New Jax and we'll see how that shitty old tub of yours holds up against the Florida militia."

The Federals and police seemed to be distracted. Quietly, Zulaika pushed down a little on *Sadie's* throttle. There was a crack and a bullet whistled past her ear. She looked up at the cutter. On its deck, three sailors were aiming rifles at her. She shut off the engine, raised her hands slowly, and sat down. So did Mabiba.

The argument between the Federals and the police got louder and louder, until the Federals fired a shot from their deck gun across the police boat's bow. The police boat turned and headed back toward Florida.

The Coast Guard cutter fired a line from a little cannon-like thing. It fell across *Sadie's* bow and Zulaika made it fast to the mooring cleat. And the next thing they knew, *Sadie* was boarded by Coast Guard sailors and the women were taken prisoner.

The sailors took them on board the cutter and brought them before an officer. The officer was fortyish, but he hadn't worn well. Looked kind of grizzled. And he had an odd smile. Kind of like a shark with his mouth closed.

"What's the problem, Commander?" asked Zulaika.

"Lieutenant," said the officer, pointing at his insignia. (Actually, Zulaika had known that.) "Lieutenant Lusinski. And there's really no problem. We can let you go immediately, as soon as we make sure you aren't wanted by the Federal authorities and have paid your income tax."

"Income tax? What the hell is income tax?" said Mabiba.

"Do you admit, then, you haven't paid?" said the lieutenant.

"I know about income tax," said Zulaika. "It's voluntary. We don't have to pay."

"Not quite true," said the lieutenant. "The tax is not voluntary, the assessment procedure is. That means you're supposed to report how much tax you owe, and pay it. We shouldn't have to calculate it, and collect it from you, but we can."

"You can't enforce that," said Zulaika. "The Florida cop was right — you have no police power."

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"Again, not quite true. The Act of 2031 did take away our police power, it's true — in the jurisdictions of the States. But there are still two places where we can enforce Federal law: Washington, D.C. — "

"Under water," interjected Mabiba.

"Not quite. Not at low tide. Anyway, the second place is...." He sort of smiled, showing his teeth like a shark.

"Oh my," said Zulaika. "Federal waters."

"Give that lady a cigar," said the lieutenant. "You owe income tax, and here on this vessel we can collect it. In fact, we carry a U.S. magistrate just for the purpose of levying tax judgments." He pointed to a brass plaque on the bulkhead:

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
GEORGE H. LUSINSKI
MAGISTRATE

Lt. Lusinski picked up a little wooden mallet and struck it on his desk.

"The United States Tax Court is now in session, George H. Lusinski, presiding. Docket item seventy-eight dash, er, one. Yes. You are the first this year. To make it easier, I will consolidate your cases. Do you wish the assistance of counsel?"

"Counsel?" said Zulaika.

"Due Process," said the lieutenant. "The United States Constitution endows us with certain inalienable rights, in particular the right to Due Process."

"I guess so," said Zulaika.

"Very well. Lieutenant Turteltaub, please."

An uncannily tall officer with a black beard appeared as if by magic. "Lieutenant J.G. Harold Turteltaub, U.S. Coast Guard, at your service," he said.

Lt. Lusinski said, "This court will recess for — oh, let's say twenty minutes. Use my desk, Harry, I'm going to the crapper." He walked out the door and the tall Lt. Turteltaub somehow folded himself to fit behind the desk.

"God damn," said Mabiba. "You caught us just like a fish. You catch many fish like us?"

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"We do some."

"What happens now?" asked Zulaika.

"Well, you could still estimate your own taxes." Lt. Turteltaub showed her a form. It said:

1. How much money did you make last year? ____.__
2. How much money do you have left? ____.__
3. Your tax: please send us the amount on line 2.

Mabiba and Zulaika stared at the form, open-mouthed. Finally Lt. Turteltaub began to laugh. "It's our little joke...," he said.

Zulaika let out her breath. Mabiba looked like she was going to start cussing again, but Zulaika glared at her and she said nothing.

"...It's really much more complicated." Lt. Turteltaub showed them a long form with many pages. It looked like it had been written on and erased a few times. One page was nearly torn in half. "Of course, this is just for show. We do it all on computer now." He opened a desk drawer and pulled out an old laptop computer.

Mabiba laughed. "What a museum piece."

Lt. Turteltaub nodded seriously. "The Smithsonian does have its uses."

They began to fill out the forms. It took longer than twenty minutes, and there was a lot of mumbo-jumbo about "non-cash economy" and "Florida fiscal dollars" which Zulaika didn't understand at all, and what's more, she doubted that Lt. Turteltaub did either.

Finally they were finished. "It looks like your tax is forty-seven dollars," said Lt. Turteltaub. "We'll round off the pennies in your favor."

"Hmmm. That's not too bad," said Zulaika. "We don't have that kind of cash, but there must be something on board the boat. Would you like to buy some fresh crabs? Guaranteed non-toxic."

"Uh, I think I should warn you...," said Lt. Turteltaub.

Lt. Lusinski came back into the room. "Dammit, Harry, aren't you finished yet?"

"They have no cash," said Lt. Turteltaub.

"What's their boat worth?"

"I figure about thirty-seven fifty, F.O.B. Washington."

"Well, damn. That won't keep us in diesel for a week."

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"Hey, wait a minute," said Zulaika. "What are you talking about? That boat's worth sixteen thousand easy, in New Jax. Not any thirty-seven fifty."

"And we only owe forty some-odd dollars, not four thousand," said Mabiba.

"That's what I was trying to tell you," said Lt. Turteltaub. "We're talking Federal dollars here — gold dollars, by the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2028. One Federal dollar is worth about five hundred of your Florida graybacks."

"I guess your boat's worth a little more in Washington than New Jacksonville," said Lt. Lusinski.

"Oh," said Mabiba. "Uh...could we declare bankruptcy?"

"Afraid not," said Lt. Turteltaub, getting up. "Federal taxes take precedence."

Lt. Lusinski sat down behind his desk. "Well, then," he said. "The court is prepared to begin condemnation and seizure proceedings against the property of the aforenamed...." He peered at the laptop. "Zulaika and Mabiba, no last names?"

"That's right," said Lt. Turteltaub. "You read past those missing pixels pretty well."

"Wait a minute," said Zulaika. "You said gold dollars. Can I pay in gold?"

"Oh no, not the gold," said Mabiba.

"We got to keep the boat, babe."

"Gold? You must be kidding," said Lt. Turteltaub. "Well, I guess you can; the statutory exchange rate is ten dollars a fine ounce."

"Act of 2028," said Lt. Lusinski solemnly.

Zulaika had been clutching the little sack ever since retrieving it from beneath the boat. She opened its drawstring and upended it. Five Krugerrands fell onto Lt. Lusinski's desk.

"I think we got some change coming," she said.

Well, change turned out to be a different matter. Those Federals couldn't have come up with change to save their butts, and Zulaika knew it. She watched them squirm while they invented interest and penalty charges they had somehow forgotten, and even then they couldn't quite get to fifty dollars.

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Zulaika had a big smile on her face. "Tell you what. You fill us up with fuel and give us some supplies, we'll call it square."

"Ha!" said Mabiba. "Guess we must be the fish that got away. Going to have to catch yourself some other fish."

Lt. Lusinski's expression got kind of hard. "Well, I guess so," he said. "Tell you what, you get in your boat, we'll fuel you up. I've got to get on the radio."

Zulaika and Mabiba got into *Sadie* and prepared to get going. Seemed like it took those Federals an awful long time to get the fuel and supplies loaded. But finally the sailors got back on board the cutter, and Lt. Lusinski looked down from the cutter's deck and told the women, "You're free to go."

Zulaika fired up the engine and Mabiba began to cast off the bow and stern lines, when what should come chugging up but a big Florida State Marine Police patrol boat. Zulaika looked up at Lt. Lusinski.

The Coast Guard officer looked back down at her. He had his shark expression on again. "You better cast off, ladies. We have to be on our way."

"Wait a minute," said Zulaika. "You can't leave us here like this."

"Sure I can," said Lt. Lusinski. "Can and will. Just as soon as I give Mr. Marine Police over there one of these gold coins for evidence."

I guess you recollect they called treasure divers "looters" in Florida, and Zulaika and Mabiba both knew what they did to looters. It was kind of cruel, but not unusual. Not in Florida.

"Don't do this!" shouted Zulaika. "Have mercy. Those men have it in for us. We might not survive. And we're U.S. taxpayers."

"Well," said the lieutenant, still grinning and showing his teeth, "I guess we could transport you to Washington."

"Georgia would be fine," said Mabiba.

"'Fraid we can't put ashore in Georgia. They don't like Federals too much there. In fact, we can't really put ashore anywhere up this whole coast. Except Washington, of course."

"You don't have to put us ashore," said Zulaika. "Just let us off in our boat."

"Well," said the lieutenant in a real soft voice, "I guess you didn't know about the transportation fee. Unless you got a lot more gold, I don't suspect you're going to have that boat much longer."

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Lieutenant Turteltaub explained it all while they were on their way to Washington. There was this Federal act, left over from the last century — hadn't passed much laws the last fifty years, didn't really need to, probably couldn't find a quorum in Congress if they tried. Anyhow, this law said any civilian using military transportation had to reimburse the Government for the cost. And it took a hellacious number of dollars to run that cutter. But they settled on thirty-seven fifty and called it square.

Well, Zulaika and Mabiba wound up in Washington. And it wasn't quite under water. Not at low tide. They had no boat, no fishing gear, no crab traps, and no home back in Florida to go to. Not when the police wanted them as looters.

Zulaika just stood there on the mud flats and began to cry. "Dammit, Mabiba, I really screwed up. I always tried to be the smart one, make plans, always know what I was doing. And I just got outsmarted."

"It's okay, babe," Mabiba said.

"It isn't okay. It's my fault. They were going to take *Sadie* anyway. I couldn't save her, and I lost our gold too. Got proud, tried to out-sharp that Goddamn sharp lieutenant."

"I guess he's been doing this a long time," said Mabiba. "Isn't your fault."

But Zulaika just cried harder and harder.

"Look here, Miz Zulaika," said Mabiba in her sternest voice. "You can't always be smart as you want to be. But you're something better. You stuck by me when I let off my temper at that policeman, when they would have let us go. You never gave me a hard time about that. And you stuck by me again when I mouthed off to that old lieutenant. I know I pissed him off, sometimes I just do that. And maybe that's why he decided to turn us over to the police. But you never threw it up to me, not once. You're the loyalest friend in the world, and I love you for it."

She gave Zulaika a big hug, and then reached into the waistband of her pants and pulled out a small sack. "You know, you never once asked me if I found anything in that little safe. Look here." And she poured about a dozen big shiny diamonds into Zulaika's cupped hands.

And we all lived happily ever after.

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Since we published "The Girl Who Ate Butterflies" back in 1999, M. Rickert has quietly built up a following with her well-written and risky stories such as "Leda," "Angel Face," and "Bread and Bombs." Her latest story feels like a blend of Latin American magic realism with North American superheroism. That might sound like a mismatch, but read on and see.

The Super Hero Saves the World

By M. Rickert

WHEN SHE WAS THREE A python swallowed her alive. Her mother was dead but when they cut Marcado out, she was sucking her thumb, peacefully asleep. The rescuers crossed themselves, then spit on the red ground. Her father stared at her in the split belly of the beast, the odd stamen of its brutal flower, until the cook, who was used to dealing with the bloody facts of appetite, pushed past the men and lifted her out. She tried to hand the bloody child to the grieving father but he would not touch her, shocked, the veterinarian said, by the double miracle of the mother's death and child's recovery.

It was the cook who strung together tiny bells and tied them around Marcado's ankles to warn away any other attacks. You'd think such a noisy child would know no secrets. But she did. Like a house with a belled cat, the family soon became accustomed to the constant ringing. Marcado knew that the cook mixed poor flour in with good and sent a sack of it off each week with her cousin (a small dark man with a mustache that curled beyond his cheeks) and in this way fed two families on the budget for one.

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Marcado knew that her sister, Elsine, had a crush on the veterinarian who was married and did disgusting things to the farm animals when he thought no one was looking. Marcado also knew what her father did and did not do when the python swallowed her mother, though this memory was from the time before the bells and was becoming a ghost.

He had been strange ever since that day. Marcado knew there were rumors about him, but she was too short to hear what they were. He had taken to standing beneath the pepper tree, weeping and eating the hot fruit until his mouth became red with blisters or the cook pulled him back into the house, whichever came first. He gave Marcado peppermints, rubber balls, and dolls with eyelashes, his dark sad eyes searching her face in a way she was too young to evaluate, while Elsine colored black hearts and sucked on stones.

Then, one day, while Marcado pirouetted through the house, and Elsine tore the petals off the orchids in the vase on the dining room table, their father announced that they were moving to Los Angeles, or Ellay as he said in the flat-sounding new language.

Elsine cried for her veterinarian and in a desperate attempt left several paper hearts and polished stones in strategic locations where he was meant not only to find them, but to discern their meaning. He did find the strange gifts that led him to believe, correctly, that he was being followed, and, incorrectly, that he was being warned. He shredded the paper hearts, threw the stones in the river, and became fevered in his prayers of apology, then angry at a God who had abandoned him to such immoral desires that he could neither comprehend nor ignore, and finally, upon the occasion of finding a whole basket of stones outside the Rineros' barn, fell to his knees, babbling and weeping until Elsine, whom he called his "angel," led him home to his wife who took him into the kitchen and set him to peeling onions.

The cook wept too, as she packed the linen tablecloths and lace curtains, lavender sachets tucked into the corner of each box. But Marcado just danced. She knew the tears belonged more to the stolen flour, the cakes and bread and tortillas, than to her.

Even Marcado's father, though he smiled and waved his arms expansively when he spoke about Ellay, was discovered many an early morning standing next to the pepper tree as if rooted there himself, whispering to no one.

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Only Marcado was happy. She was happy to leave the ghost of her mother who followed her around with useless information about washing her hair with rosemary, and who had temper tantrums, throwing herself across Marcado's bed and screaming as if she was the little girl and Marcado the mother.

Marcado was so excited her bells rang through the night. Her father and sister lost all their dreams in the shiver of excitement she could not contain even in sleep. They stared at the ceiling as if even it had become something to be missed while Marcado dreamt of a great city of glass-spired buildings, golden castles trellised with roses, angels everywhere, winged in clouds, and on sidewalks white as pearls. Los Angeles, City of Angels, here we come.

NOW, AT FIFTEEN, Marcado's life before L.A. is a distant sort of dream. A family legend. Pomegranates remind her. In the split of red she sometimes sees her mother, but that ghost was left behind, and maybe that was a dream, too. That business about being swallowed by the python, alive and whole, doesn't make sense, it can't be true. Though Elsine insists. "Oh, yeah. And when they cut you out you were wrapped in Mama's skin."

"I don't think so."

"Papa and her were both trying to save you. It's your fault she's dead. Lucky you didn't kill him too, or we'd be orphans."

After she finishes her homework Marcado changes into purple tights, a red leotard, a little black skirt. She takes the dirty, knotted string of bells, ties it around her ankle, and dances through the house.

"Your mother used to dance like that."

She nods but doesn't speak. Around her father she remains, after all this time, mostly silent.

He is a lonely man. He thought America with its grinning ways and endless fruit could save him. But he is equally unhappy amongst the palm trees, white concrete and stucco as he'd been amongst the pepper tree, the velvet house, her grave. His skin is yellow tinged, his mustache ragged. At night his youngest daughter dances in her room, those bells ringing darkly.

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He drinks cerveza on the front steps and watches the white light of police helicopters searching. He wonders how it has happened that his oldest daughter has become so successfully Anglo while Marcado isn't really anything, not Latino, or Anglo, only strange. All that business with the python, he thinks. How much does she remember?

The school counselor brings Marcado into her office to discuss her amazing test scores.

"You could do anything if you make the right choices, Marcado. What are your plans for the future?"

"I want to be a super hero."

The counselor speaks to Marcado's teachers who all report her as a quiet, good student. Mrs. Fiddlestein adds, "Her poetry is, well, read this."

The super hero
folds her cape,
tucks it in her drawer,
in the back in the dark.
She takes up eating eggs instead,
wowing crowds by swallowing them whole,
in their shells, cracked first to prove
the point.

Sometimes a reporter asks,
But why did you stop saving lives?
She answers by eating twelve raw eggs.

What can an ex-super hero say?
There were always more.
She was never enough,
the world is like an egg,
such potential, such possibility!

At night, in her brightly painted
circus trailer, she checks eggs
by the light of a candle,

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revealed fetuses set aside
to be swallowed in the dark.

She dreams the world on fire,
rises weary to dress for the act.

In the tent the people cheer
for the elephants, the lion tamer,
the trapeze artist,
but when she stands in the center,
swallowing eggs, they boo,
and throw cotton candy cones,
popcorn cartons and empty cups.

Nobody likes a super hero
who gives up her act.

She paints her face with wide eyes,
like a clown,
and wears dresses of silk, reds
and purples that reveal her strong arms
going slack.

One night they throw stones.
She has to be hurried off the floor,
and hidden in the fat lady's trailer,
while the angry mob tries to find her,
carrying guns and rope.

Oh how they love to hate her!
"Ladies and gentlemen, the legendary, ex-
super hero who could save the world,
will now eat eggs instead."

The roar of hate is what she lives for.

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Sometimes, she pulls out the cape,
touches the red silk and remembers
the cheers of thousands, the clasp
of grateful hand, the thrill
of catching a falling body,

now she catches hate instead.
Each night she vomits
outside her trailer.
The other performers insist
to not be near her.
In the starry dark she retches
all she's swallowed,
then buries it in the hole
she digs each morning.

It's the sound of a funeral shovel.
We are the dead, she tells them.
"Why don't you go back where you came from?"
She smiles, they boo and throw things.
She lifts one white orb,
they jeer,
she puts it in her mouth
they stamp their feet on the bleachers,
she inhales
they cheer, as she struggles for breath.
She bends over to swallow.
They clap. They scream for more.

The counselor calls Marcado's father to school. He sits nervously and listens as she tries to explain.

"She's special. I mean in a good way. She might be a poet." She hands him the poem to read.

He massages his forehead with thick fingers, swallows before he speaks. "Why have you called me away from work to read the ramblings of an adolescent girl?"

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"I thought — "

He stands, tosses the paper on the desk. For a moment the counselor is frightened and maybe a little turned on. But he just turns and walks out. She catches her breath. Picks up the paper. Reads it again. Shrugs. Tucks it into a manila folder. She stares at the wall of posters promising different futures and thinks maybe she made the wrong choice. Maybe she should have become a lawyer, or a dentist, or the woman who works at the coffee shop, obviously years too old for such work.

Marcado receives a letter. In the mail! She opens the envelope carefully, in her bedroom after school. Outside her open window, cars hum and honk past, but when the letter is pulled out she hears the sound of birds. She unfolds the vellum, faintly lined like skin. In the center, in neat square letters, is printed the single word.

MURDERER

Marcado looks at the envelope. No return address, the postmark, local. She slips the word back into the torn envelope, tucks it in her drawer with her panties and bras. She puts on her tights and her leotard, the little black skirt. She ties the knotted string of bells to her ankle. She puts *Carmina Burana* into the CD player. She opens all the doors in all the rooms and dances through the house.

Her father hears the noise halfway down the block. He thinks he sees dark birds circling his roof but then realizes they are seagulls, lost and looking for the ocean, perhaps made crazy by his daughter's wild dancing. Then, just like that, he thinks of boiled eggs, peeling the cracked shells from the gelatinous orbs, and he smells their gaseous odor. He hurries to his house.

She leaps away from him into the open mouth of her bedroom. Closes the door. Turns the music off. In the silence she can hear her own breathing. She stares at the closed door.

She makes sugar cookies shaped like jack-o'-lanterns. With black and white icing she turns the grinning faces into skulls. "Don't you have anything of hers?" she asks.

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He shakes his head and pats his mustache with one thick finger. "We haven't celebrated this for years."

Elsine stops by with her new boyfriend. He is tall and blond. His blue eyes widen at Marcado's cookies. Elsine pulls him into the living room where Marcado has put the TV in the closet and turned its table into an altar of red and lace, construction paper crosses, and plastic skeletons. Elsine rolls her eyes and turns David so his back is to the altar and he faces her father instead. "We just stopped by on the way to the movie. I forgot something." She goes into her bedroom. They listen to drawers open and close while they appraise each other silently. When she comes out, she is still grinning and now, he smiles too. She takes his hand and leads him through the kitchen. She grabs four warm skulls and hands one to him. They leave a trail of crumbs, flour footprints, and a strange feeling in the air that doesn't belong in the house without them.

Marcado lights the candles and turns off all the lamps. "It's not the same," her father says. "Besides, I didn't know. I had these plans for a while."

Marcado is glad to be alone. She places cookies on the altar. She sits at the kitchen table and pours two glasses of wine.

But though she waits a long time, and the candles shorten, and she empties and fills her wineglass many times, the other remains full, the cookies, unbroken.

She rises unsteady from the chair. She blows out candles. Question mark spirals of smoke linger in the air. She falls asleep with all her clothes on. She doesn't hear her father return.

He watches the girl sleeping in the crook of a python. He stands like a fear statue, an ordinary man who cannot escape the terrible truth of himself. He propels forward, feet last, as though pushed. She sleeps peacefully in shadows and blankets that take on the shape of his demon. Where does she get her courage? Not from him, that is certain.

She is twenty feet tall. She can keep buildings standing with her palms. She can catch lightning and spear the bad guys with it. She can fly and also disappear. Nobody dies on her watch. Her kryptonite? She sleeps. When Marcado sleeps, evil things happen.

She wakes with a start. "Papa?"

"Go to sleep, mija."

She listens to his footsteps receding.

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* * *

Elsine is getting married! Marcado can't quite believe that she has found someone who loves her. She knows this is an unkind thought. Elsine starts doing weird things like kissing Marcado on the cheek, or buying her little presents, perfume, earrings, things she has no idea what to do with. Maybe this is the real Elsine. Maybe the mean one was just a twenty-year stage.

"How about paper like this? For the invitations?" Elsine pulls a vellum sheet from a stack in her dresser drawer. The paper is faintly lined like skin, and in the center the word murderer is written in cursive, crossed out, then printed in the straight square letters Marcado remembers. She traces the word with her finger. Elsine looks over her shoulder. "Oh Marcado, can you forgive me?"

"You?" Marcado says.

"I hated you." Elsine's face strains with the emotion as though it still exists.

"Don't worry about it," Marcado says. Elsine gives her a hug. Their father, who is eavesdropping behind the door, bows his head into his hands and weeps. When the sisters hear this they hug him and shower him with kisses. They think his tears are about the wedding.

"Don't worry," Elsine says, "you will always be my papa."

For a treat they make hot chocolate with cinnamon and nutmeg, swirled to a froth. They are sitting around the kitchen table when she finds them. She stands in the doorway, watching. Oh, how they have aged! She looks at her husband and shakes her head. What trouble he's put her through. How many miles, how many wrong houses, how many years has it taken to get here! Nobody understands this about the dead. They think nothing can hurt them. As if pain is only a body thing.

The hair on the back of Marcado's neck stands up. Her father is laughing; Elsine waving her arms and speaking loudly, but Marcado has lost trace of the story. She smells something funny.

Her mother waves frantically from the doorway but it is useless. The girl has lost her vision. The mother shakes her head. All she wants to do is get on with her death. Why does everything have to be so difficult?

She wanders through the little house. She looks into her husband's room. She can smell peppermint, dust, and his scent like good dirt. She

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sighs, and he, in the kitchen, in the middle of laughter, stops and thinks of her, the way she was on that last morning together. How unlimited their love! How limited his courage! He wipes a tear from his eye that both daughters think was put there by laughter.

She finds the bride's room littered with magazines of white girls in six thousand-dollar dresses, books titled "How to Plan a Perfect Wedding" and "It's Your Day to Be a Princess!" Elsine. She didn't come with them that day and so has been both spared and slighted.

The last room is Marcado's. She walks in and sits at the edge of the unmade bed. She wants to throw herself across it and cry, the way she used to, but she just sits there and tries not to lose control until the girl comes into the room and gets undressed, revealing a beautiful, healthy body, before it is sheathed by a cotton nightgown. She seems slightly disoriented. She opens wrong drawers and turns in circles. "Just go to sleep," whispers her mother. And she does.

THE STEAM of boiled eggs fills the kitchen with pungent odor. Her mother laughs and her father spins her in his arms. He nuzzles her neck and she lets him. Together they pack the basket with mangoes, tortillas, cold chicken, chocolate, wine, the boiled eggs.

They try to leave without her but Marcado stamps her feet and cries. They laugh and shower her with kisses. The three of them go together, leaving Elsine, who is busy coloring hearts, with the cook.

They sing songs as they drive. They pull over and spread out the flowered tablecloth. They kiss each other and they kiss her. They eat and drink. Marcado is full. Sleepily, she crawls to the edge of the blanket to watch the clouds until her eyes hurt. She rolls on her side and watches them through the lace of her lashes. Her father lies on top of her mother who is surrounded by eggshell and mango peel. He caresses her body and moves his hips in a strange lying down dance. They both look over at her but her eyes are so heavy she cannot do anything but close them.

She wakes to the sunlight falling around her in rainbow circles and a strange noise. Her father stands with his back to her, by the river, his legs spread apart. His gold urine flows in an arc. The strange sucking noise is closer. Her mother screams. Marcado turns and sees the great dark slither.

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A beast is eating Mama! Marcado screams. She looks at her father. He turns and stands there, his pants still unzipped, his thing shrinking in his hands. Papa! Papa! He stands there with his mouth open, his eyes wide. Marcado screams again. Papa! He is a tree. A rock. Useless. She stands. He does nothing to stop her. "Mama!" The great mouth opens.

Sun streams all around her. She does not shake the dream from her sleep, nor does it slip away the way they usually do, when she remembers it.

There, the ghost says, now you remember.

Marcado is a bridesmaid and has to suffer her sister's style, a shiny green dress with little straps that slip down her shoulders, and green shoes, dyed to match, that hurt. The flower crown keeps sliding and only her black tangle of hair stops it from falling off. She watches her sister dancing the first dance with David. They smile and stare into each other's eyes. They do not seem to care that today of all days, L.A. is experiencing a thunderstorm. The guests are all a little soggy. The reception hall's lights flicker but Elsine and David just dance and smile at each other. Apparently they think love is enough. When the dance ends he leans over and kisses her. The crowd cheers and the drummer bangs his drum.

The father's dance is announced. He comes to the spotlight. A handsome man in his tuxedo. He smiles at Elsine and takes her hand. The crowd claps. The lights flicker. Marcado watches the dance and thinks this is the first woman he's danced with since her mother. Maybe. What does she know? Everyone has their secrets.

Other couples join them. Somebody cuts in, a bald man Marcado thinks is David's uncle. Her father just stands there. Alone in the middle of the dancers. Searching faces in the crowd. The silver ball spins spots of colored light between them. He rubs his mustache. In another second he will turn away. She steps forward. Limping slightly in the stupid green shoes. She walks through the spinning spots of light. He takes her hand.

"You look beautiful," he says.

"I look green."

He laughs. When did his teeth turn this un-white shade? When did his skin loosen around the jaw? Was he always so afraid?

"Papa?"

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"Yes?"

She shrugs and smiles. He cocks his head, then tries to do something fancy with spinning her and they laugh in the tangle he creates.

The lights flicker, then shut off. Marcado thinks they have all been swallowed by the beast; the bride, the groom, the guests in soggy shoes, strangers on the beach, families in TV rooms, the homeless on the street, the dead, the brave, the weak, the forgiven and unforgiven. They continue dancing and in only a few steps the light returns. The crowd claps and hoots as if this simple act is something extraordinary, heroic even. They don't know about the beast. Only Marcado knows. What does she do with such powerful information? She dances. In this way, she begins to save the world.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

ONWARD CHRISTIAN MOVIES

WHEN stripped of its religious context, analyzed in terms of its narrative content alone, the Holy Bible contains some of the richest and most spectacularly mounted fantasy tales ever conceived. That they have been elevated to the status of myth, of spiritual text, and — by some — of absolute literal truth does not diminish this fact. It might be said that the Bible is, indeed, the source material for all western fantasy writing. Certainly one can perceive the seeds of the modern disaster novel in the story of Noah and the Ark, and the tale of Christ Himself, that of a child humbly born who is called to a great purpose and difficult ordeal and terrible sacrifice, may be seen as the archetypal model of the moral quest, a plot that in one way or another informs all high fantasy, from Tolkien on. The stories of Moses, of Ezekiel and the wheel...these and a number of others each have generated entire subgenres of fantasy literature.

The Bible's influence on film has been somewhat less profound. In Hollywood the religious picture has evolved from sweetly faithful films such as *The Song of Bernadette* to historical epics like *The Robe*, De Mille's *The Ten Commandments*, and *Ben Hur*, movies that accentuate the action elements and either play down or bowdlerize the spiritual aspects of the stories; and thereafter to an endless stream of horror movies, beginning with William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* and proceeding on through ever more feeble imitations and variations on the theme. Along the way, of course, there have been films that broke these molds, including several biopics about Christ, most of them

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risible, notably Nicholas Ray's horrid *King of Kings* (1961), which the late writer and critic James Agee suggested should be retitled *I Was a Teenage Jesus*. A number of movies have appropriated some element of Biblical lore to further plot, the most accomplished being Steven Spielberg's campy actioner, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The most intriguing of all these pictures, a film that is actually *about* a portion of the Bible and thus the most pertinent to this review, is Michael Tolkin's *The Rapture*, which tells the story of Sharon (Mimi Rogers), a hedonistic, sexually promiscuous woman who finds salvation in the days preceding the Rapture, the day when God looses the riders of the Apocalypse and calls the faithful home to heaven, causing people all over the word to vanish. Tolkin's take on this portion of scripture presents a rather bleak view of divinity, portraying God as a willful, cruel master who ultimately demands of Sharon the Abraham-like act of murdering her young daughter, an act she subsequently regrets to such an extent that she rejects God and so dooms herself to eternal torment. *The Rapture* should have at the very least associational interest to devotees of science fiction and fantasy in that it offers David Duchovny's best film work to date —Duchovny plays Patrick, Sharon's lover and eventual husband. Albeit intellectually imprecise and flawed in execution, it is nonetheless a very watchable film concerning the Book of Revelation, an artifact that — whether or not one strips away all religious context — might be classified as The Greatest Horror Story Ever Told.

The Apocalypse, the Rapture, and the entirety of the Book of Revelation have provided the subject matter for a great many Christian novels. By far the most successful of these commercially is the Left Behind series, which as of this date numbers eleven volumes, with more on the horizon. Created by a writer, Jerry Jenkins, in tandem with a fundamentalist expert on the Bible, the Reverend Timothy LaHaye, and purporting to adhere strictly in its fictional progress to prophecies contained within the Book of Revelation, the series has thus far sold in excess of fifty million copies worldwide and recently spawned two movies, *Left Behind* and *Left Behind II: Tribulation Force*. Both star Kirk Cameron, late of the alleged television comedy, *Growing Pains*, in the role of Buck Johnson, a TV journalist (he works for GNN) who might be described

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as "literally crusading." As is the case with its evil (to fundamentalist sensibilities) twin, the Harry Potter books, the Left Behind series is a phenomenon whose massive appeal beggars legitimate explanation. Both projects are marginally written, though J. K. Rowling has gained sufficient artistic cachet so as to be awarded one of the genre's many bowling trophies. Both treat of subjects that have been handled far more compellingly, more charmingly. Both rely upon conventional fantasy structures and break no new ground as regards level of invention. LaHaye's and Jenkins's books are somewhat more standardized and more primitive than Rowling's. Reading them, one gets the idea that the authors are obeying rules set forward by some august institution such as the Famous Writers School: No sentences longer than four inches unless they comprise a list, and so forth. Nevertheless they both thrive in the same simplistic, mega-accessible, commercially viable atmosphere, and so demand to be judged by equivalent critical standards. A significant difference may perhaps be perceived in the fact that whereas the Rowling books are primarily aimed at children, the target audience for the Left Behind series is the Christian reader.

The film producers of these two franchises have taken widely divergent roads in creating and marketing their products. Preceded by trumpet blasts of Internet buzz and other pre- and post-production unofficial publicity, heralded by kazillions of television and print ads, funded with mega-budgets, and cast with top-notch character actors, the Potter films gloriously burst forth on thousands of screens across the nation, accompanied by a deluge of official products and tie-ins. The Left Behind movies present themselves more humbly: cut-rate budgets and a cast of non- and used-to-be-entities; advertising limited mostly to word of mouth generated by the books; given a limited release and sold as cheaply priced DVDs and videos. There is no doubt that the Potter movies, albeit bland as mayonnaise, are better in every respect. The Left Behind movies, however, strike me as more interesting in that they are so clearly propagandist in nature—I'm speaking here of propaganda in the best sense of the word. Like the propaganda films of the 1940s that encouraged patriotism, faith in God and country, and constant striving against the Axis menace, the Left Behind movies encourage moral behavior, faith in God, and con-

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stant striving against the menace of the Antichrist. They are billboards for a cause. All art, of course, is propagandist and coercive by nature. We are a simple species. Authors, filmmakers, artists, they are all trying to sell a message to an audience, one that, no matter how complex, can ultimately be reduced to a slogan.

The producers of *Left Behind II: Tribulation Force* have dressed their message in such thin cinematic cloth, they have managed to turn post-Rapture Earth into a rather mundane environment. True, there are riots and conflicts, people grieving their mysteriously disappeared loved ones, etc., but this is all portrayed so flatly, it has no great dramatic weight. The sole special effect of note is that the face of the Antichrist, Nicolae Carpathia — played as a fuming and rather inept tight-ass, a kind of Biblical Colonel Klink, by Gordon Currie — morphs into faintly hideous aspect. Yet this may be a case in which ineptitude achieves an artful purpose. As I watched, I realized that the post-Rapture was being presented in a way that emulated the way a great many of us view the events that surround us — as history televised by CNN (GNN), with interviews and news footage leavened here and there with commercials for the basic Christian message conceived as playlets involving continuing characters. Be it intentional or by happy accident, that format, despite the atrocious acting, the awful dialogue, came to inspire in me the almost drugged fascination one achieves when watching a white Bronco drive slowly along the freeway or cranes digging through the rubble of the World Trade Center. And this made the future history of Revelation, the fantastic tapestry of plagues and apparitions both glorious and monstrous, seem ominously plausible.

The time following the Rapture is known as the Tribulation and the force of the title, numbering four, a nurse, a pilot, a preacher, and the aforementioned journalist, set out, assisted by angelic beings, to make the world aware that Nicolae Carpathia is the Antichrist, and that his ascendancy to the head of a world government has been foretold by Biblical prophecy. The nurse gives comfort to the dying and goes after Buck in homespun, wholesome fashion that puts those of us addicted to the TVLand Channel in mind of Betsy's flirtations on *Father Knows Best*. The preacher instructs the other members of the force as to biblical prophecy; the

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pilot becomes Carpathia's personal pilot; and Buck the journalist infiltrates Carpathia's inner circle, a task that appears no more difficult than Colonel Hogan tricking Schultz into giving him the keys to the stalag gate — again, this is redolent of Forties propaganda flicks, which portrayed Axis leaders as bungling and clownish. Buck's overarching purpose is to reach the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, where God's Witnesses have manifested: two men who, according to prophesy, will wake 144,000 witnesses to stand against Carpathia. The Wall is heavily guarded, but Buck, aided by an angelic being who warbles "Amazing Grace" in such an ethereal fashion that the guards become enthralled, manages to videotape the Witnesses as they speak God's Truth. When the guards break free of the spell and attack, the Witnesses incinerate them by breathing fire from their mouths.

Will Buck get the Word out? Will the Tribulation Force survive the outlawing of religious practice initiated by Carpathia? You'll have to see *Left Behind III* to find out...or read the books, which, now numbering eleven, have led their audience to the brink of Armageddon, the bombing of the ancient city of Petra where a multitude has gathered to await the Glorious Appearing, and the declaration by Carpathia that he is God.

If the Left Behind series were done as a Hollywood project, we might have Brad Pitt as Buck, George Clooney as the hunky pilot, Morgan Freeman as the preacher, maybe Claire Danes as the nurse, and there would be a multiplicity of pyrotechnic miracles and CGI monstrosities, with video games and perhaps even action figures to follow. Buy, the message would say, not — as it does in the movies that have been made — Believe. That's the salient difference between the two. Film used as a marketing tool or as — in evangelical terms — a mission tool. Both purposes might be better served if Revelation were not treated as a tool at all, but as what it mostly is: a story with the mythic potency that accrues to all great fantasy. We carry in our cells the story of Apocalypse, a story of monsters, plagues, a great decline, and a war of salvation. The story seems to ridge up the very spine of our history, replicating itself over and over again in miniature. Viewed either as a literal or a metaphorical text, Revelation wields an undeniable power over us and commands our fascination, whether or not

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we are believers. Thus, though the Left Behind movies are somewhat effective, by attempting to make their central myth too ordinarily credible, by neutering the fantastic and grotesque elements thereof, they must in the end be seen only for what they intend to be: ingenuous and rather crude manipulations of a towering legend.

"Can I wait till the rest of my party gets here!"

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That Damon again! Alfred Damon Runyon's spirit seems to be hanging over this month's issue like a gambler watching to see if his six-to-five bet pays off. But while Runyon's beat was Broadway, Jack Cady's new story takes us to a little town in Wisconsin with some big doings afoot.

Mr. Cady reports that his latest story collection, Ghosts of Yesterday, *has been out for a few months now. He says also that two sentences in this story were adapted from* The Mauve Decade *by Thomas Beer (Alfred A. Knopf, 1937), a book that English teachers do not read, but should.*

The Twenty-Pound Canary

By Jack Cady

In memory of Damon Runyon

IF COUSIN MURPH HAD NOT expanded his lab, and if Canary Clarence had not developed a glandular condition, then Miss Janice would not have scored a husband. Uncle Willie would not be muttering confused rhymes in his sleep and writing poetry in the attic. Aunt Easy would still be a member of the Temperance Union, and forty duck hunters (more or less) would not have thrown down shotguns to take up crappie fishing.

The unhappy mess started on a winter morning when Aunt Easy wakened in her front bedroom, from which she could see neighbors scooping snow from their walks, and four-wheel drives making doughnuts in Wisconsin streets. The house was still warm from wood stoves in living room and kitchen. Aunt Easy shuffled along with her usual, early-morning cheerfulness. Until she hit the kitchen.

Pearly curtains with blue duckies hung straight. A clean and greenish tablecloth covered the round oak table where Aunt Easy did crossword puzzles and Uncle Willie read dusty books with yellowing pages. A

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patchwork cover over the bird cage shielded Parakeet-in-residence Harold from prowling night breezes.

Aunt Easy stoked the kitchen stove, made a cup of tea, and lifted the patchwork cover. She found Parakeet-in-residence Harold flat on his back, toes pointed heavenward. Her wrinkled but pretty face went blank. Her shoulders raised as she gave a light sob, and brushed curly gray hair from her forehead. Her worn bathrobe, once purple, now glowed faded pink.

Movement behind her. Uncle Willie, silver-haired, yawned into the room, took one look, paused. Whispered. "Gone to a better place I expect." Uncle Willie is a Rosicrucian and didn't believe a word of it.

"What was wrong with the place he had?" Aunt Easy was not going to be consoled. At least, not by a Rosicrucian.

She had a point. No other place in the world was as nice as that kitchen. Compared to that kitchen, Versailles was drafty, Monaco was loud, the British Museum was stuffy, and Disneyland was a laugh. Nothing, nowhere, was as warm and friendly as that kitchen. Compared to that kitchen, Harvard U. was a muddle and the White House was a mess.

Then Cousin Murph showed up. He came fumbling out of the basement where he lived among cages of rodents, antiquated computers, Bunsen burners, test tubes, and flowery little notes from lonely spinsters. Cousin Murph is moderately red-haired, thirty, lean and lank, works at the bank; and is about the only bachelor left here in Chedderburg.

Come to think of it, he's also the only redhead, the only mad scientist, and, until he got kicked out of the league, the only guy who owns a radio-guided bowling ball.

"Hummm-m-m," said Murph. He walked to the cage and got his hand smacked as he reached. Aunt Easy could see autopsy in Murph's eyes. She could sense dissection.

"Sorry," said Murph. "I'll build the coffin."

Parakeet-in-residence Harold was laid to rest in an intricately decorated box lined with velvet. I had to chip ice and frozen dirt for an hour to make a foot-deep grave beside the garden. I'm Kissing-Cousin Effie, sweet sixteen, and extra smart. Smart enough not to fall in love with Murph, which is more than I can say for some.

Of course, being extra smart, I hang around Murph's lab from time to

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time. When the late Parakeet Harold went to his rest, one of those times happened. I'd bail from school, do homework early, and be at the lab when Murph came home from the bank. He almost always brought a plate of cookies with him; gifts from local trollops looking for a husband.

The problem, as I explained it to myself, is that Murph is just too nice. He tries to fix things that won't fix...like build a designer bird, the kind that cheeps and doesn't die.

The problem, as Murph explained it, is, "We gotta have birds. You can't breed birds if you don't have birds. Where do you get birds in Wisconsin in the middle of January?" He cleaned an empty cage while all around us stood cages filled with mice, white rats, voles, and something outstandingly huge. It looked like a hamster on growth hormones. "Name of Janders," Murph explained, and his voice held apology. "Sort of a mistake." Janders twitched a nose bigger than a pig snoot. He looked sarcastic, like maybe Murph, not hamster, was the mistake.

"Dimestore in Wausau, pet store in Oshkosh, where else?" I told him. It's a good thing Murph has me, because he can't solve the least practical problem. Just the experimental stuff.

"Saturday," he said. "Assuming snow's not tail-high to a Hereford." He turned back to work on the cage. His lab is helter-skelter, but clean. Shiny counts, neatness don't.

The trip fell flat because it turned into a family occasion. Murph drove his ratty old station wagon which might have once been manufactured by a car company, but which had been improved. It now sported four-wheel drive, and all identifying marks had been removed. From a junk pile somewhere Murph had found a nameplate he'd proudly soldered to the front of the hood — Maytag.

Uncle Willie sat in front with Murph. Aunt Easy and I sat in back. Most cars can't dawdle, but we did. As we passed through town Murph slowed from ten m.p.h. to five. He watched Miss Janice clump along the sidewalk on her way to work at the library (hours 10-3 M-F, 11-2 Sat). Miss Janice dressed for the weather and did not look slim.

"Picked up weight." Uncle Willie has no right to talk. Not with that tummy hanging over his belt.

"Wearing a parka on top of a parka," Aunt Easy told him. "Janice is a lovely girl."

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Janice is not a lovely girl. Janice is an adventuress. She wears her hair up at work, long skirts to hide long legs, and glasses that make her eyes look cloudy. The minute she visits the lab, though (bearing cookies), the hair comes down, the skirt hits around the knees, and there's just enough cleavage to knock a preacher out of a pulpit. No glasses. Lovely, my dear: I think not.

Once clear of town, snow fences lining the road were banked high. Frozen lakes lay dotted with fishing shacks. Trees stood naked as windmills, and a polar wind scoured.

"Pretty day for a drive," said Willie, and quoted something out of Tacitus which made no sense at all. I mean, how often does it snow in Italy?

"...maybe a pair of finches," Aunt Easy murmured. "Or a nice canary. I can't handle another parakeet. Not just yet."

We all took a moment of silence. Parakeet-in-residence Harold had been somewhat adorable. For a bird.

The heater hummed, Maytag churned, and we finally got to the big city. We dropped Uncle Willie at a poolroom where, being adroit at the game, he figured to hustle wintering-over cheese farmers for a few bucks.

The sum of it was canaries: Aunt Easy bought one named Sylvester, and Murph bought some breeding pairs, especially a betrothed couple named Sally and Grogan. He also bought something that looked parrotish and South American. Uncle Willie won twenty bucks at pool and caught holy heck from Aunt Easy for sampling local brews. Murph drove faster going home than coming because he wanted to work with his birds. The subject of Janice did not reappear. We were all real happy, except for sweet sixteen, here, who was feeling strangely lonesome.

Things that winter got speedy, at least at the lab. Each day after work Murph committed science. Everything went fast and biblical. Grogan begat Jonathan and Jonathan begat Peter and Peter begat Cosroe, and Cosroe begat Clarence. Girl birds were involved, of course, mostly not biblical: Claudia and Shirley and Sandy and Tangerine. By the time ice began to break on the lakes, there were enough canaries singing through that lab to challenge the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

And there were women. Winter in Wisconsin makes people want to cuddle, bundle, stay close as paint on woodwork. That lab was infested

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with visiting babes wearing flimsy fashions beneath ski jackets, and not a stitch of underwear. Lady-things jiggled beneath raw silk blouses. It was worse than the locker room for gym class.

"And Murph pays no attention, not a-tall," I told Uncle Willie, telling him about the floozies. We sat at the kitchen table where I did homework and Willie read the witticisms of Charles Sumner. Frost rimed the windows, and from his cage Canary Sylvester cleared his throat.

"You're still a little young," Willie told me. "It's the breeding season, but Murph is letting our species down. He pursues a sterner mistress. Murph is all confused with science." Willie paused. "...as for the ladies...young women hit a certain age and get compulsive about marriage." He looked toward the living room where Aunt Easy was doing something-or-other. "I think I'll not go into it." He glanced uneasily out a window. A church steeple stood like a small blot on a flat horizon.

I understood. In this town everybody is Lutheran, except the few who are Methodists, or worse, Baptists, or worse, Presbyterian. In this town the only Internet service filters the crud out of everything, and the only movie features nothin' but G-rated. This town figures it's the only pure place on earth. This town thinks that Oshkosh is Sodom and Wasau is Gomorrah.

Things changed, though. Murph caused it, and didn't even know it happened. When it comes to being a theorist, Murph is worse than Willie, and Willie is almost worse than anybody.

"My masterpiece," said Murph, as ice broke up on the lakes, daffodils sprouted, and he sat before a cage containing a chick, which sat beside a cage that held giant Hamster Janders. "Name of Clarence."

"Didn't know baby turkeys hatched that big."

"Not a turkey. Might be a small mistake in there, someplace." Murph looked a little guilty.

"He's got this look in his eye...."

"He'll feather up," Murph said. "He'll be buttercup yellow." Then Murph muttered to himself, something about "You got to train them young...."

Bird training. Oh, you bet.

The parade of cookies dropped off as spring progressed and Clarence grew. And grew. And grew. Fewer cookies was good. I stopped gaining pounds and growing zits.

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Janice still showed up, though. It was either Janice or Uncle Willie who ran off the other babes. A rumor circulated through town. Rumor said that Canary Clarence was only bred for practice. Rumor said that Murph had a contract from the Marines. He would breed a race of giant warriors. The babes, who had more-or-less taken the huge Hamster Janders for granted, took one look at that massive Canary Clarence. They thought of marriage, and of carrying a kid seven times bigger than a wheel of limburger, and opted out.

Meanwhile, training progressed. Flight school for Clarence. Murph enticed him from one end of the lab to the other using huge chunks of bird seed.

"He's sorting through his genes," Murph explained. "He's too doggone big to flutter, but flutter is what canaries do. He's gotta rise above it."

"...got a pleasing voice," I muttered. Clarence did not have a pleasing voice. For one thing, he could sing loud enough to shake plaster from the ceiling. For another thing, he was a baritone.

"I built in just a tad of duck persuasion," Murph explained. "When he hatched I was right there, waiting. I was the first thing he saw, and now he's fixed on me...thinks I'm his mama."

"For why?"

"So when he flies, he'll still come back to the nest. I'm his flock."

There's nothing anyone sane could say to that, but sanity is not real big around here, anyway. When word about the duck persuasion got out, Murph was denounced from every pulpit in town. The Lutherans thundered that Murph played at being God. The Methodists yelped about building flight paths to heaven. The Baptists whimpered over the Book of Revelations, and the Presbyterians claimed Murph was predestined for the hot-squat. Uncle Willie, with a Rosicrucian point-of-view, tried to keep a straight face but was constantly caught giggling. "Clarence bothers members of societies for suppressing things," Uncle Willie said. "I find that charming."

The public appearance of Clarence pretty much stunned the entire town, plus dairy farmers for a radius of forty miles. On a day of sun, and above green, green fields, Clarence rose buttercup-yellow on a summer breeze. He cruised the town. He swooped around city hall. He flapped like an eagle, coasted like a gull, and drifted high above, hovering like a vulture

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checking out the action. He was a huge yellow streak as his shadow flirted with chickens in farmyards, chased a red-tailed hawk in gyrations through the sky, and seemed searching for the best way to be obnoxious. It is gloriously recorded that he succeeded.

Because Clarence, with no spiritual training at all, chose the highest steeple in town for a perch. He was a buttercup-yellow vision of enthusiastic feathers, and as the sun went west he cast a real long shadow. He sat up there for the best part of a late afternoon singing, and trying to flutter, and warbling, and pooping. You think a goose can poop? Well, a goose can, but don't show me a goose when I'm talking about Clarence.

And loud? Bull horns are more quiet. Loudspeakers are mere whispers. That bird could make more noise flapping his wings than a Piper Cub racing its engine. On the best day of his life, Caruso would have sounded like a whisper next to Clarence. Clarence made a name for himself that day, and by the time he came home at dusk he had also made a name for Murph.

There are those who have always doubted Murph. The Ladies Aid could not stand the thought of an eligible bachelor remaining eligible, when so many solid Lutheran girls were lonesome. The Temperance Union felt that owning lab equipment is evidence of a still. And Janice (who could have her pick from most of the married men in town) was wondering if Murph was actually male.

"I am drop-dead gorgeous," she confided to Uncle Willie, "and I make a tolerable cookie. What's wrong with him?" Janice sat at the kitchen table and dealt with Willie. I sat beside Willie and dealt with algebra.

"The depth of the human psyche, about which we know so comfortably little...," Willie began.

"Don't go there," Janice told him. "Just give me your take on the problem."

"You work in a library," Willie told her, "but Murph works in a bank."

"So?"

"You wanta work in a library all your life?"

"A girl could do worse."

"You wanta work in a bank all your life?"

"I think I'm catching on." Janice looked alarmed but hopeful. For a moment I almost liked her.

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"Dear, dear Janice," I said.

"Ah, youth," she said. "Drop by the library and I'll introduce you to Krafft-Ebing."

The likable moment passed.

"Murph doesn't want to be stuck in a bank," Willie told her. "If he marries, there's a ninety-nine percent chance he's stuck."

"I can fix it," Janice said, and she sounded dreamy. "Gotcha." And she was out of there.

Janice moved quickly, but not as quick as the Ladies Aid whose members demanded that Murph be fired from the bank. That happened while the Temperance Union hounded the sheriff. The Temperance Union wanted somebody arrested, and didn't much care who, although Murph didn't make the cut. Three things came to pass:

A new rumor floated through town. It said that Murph had caught on to the critter-construction business. He would build a Guernsey who could yield ten gallons of milk from a mouthful of grass.

The Rotary then jumped to Murph's defense. The Rotary knows what is good for the cheese business, and what ain't.

A sharp and nasty dust-up between Aunt Easy and the Temperance Union ended in red-hot letters-to-the-editor, and revelations about short-cuts in cookie recipes. A fearful number of American mothers were involved.

Meanwhile, Murph kept Clarence on a tight rein. No more outdoor flights. After the church steeple debacle it seemed best if Clarence dropped out of sight.

Other rumors surfaced. Murph would quadruple tourist traffic because he would a build a real Babe, Paul Bunyon's Great Blue Ox. Rumor had it that Murph had invented a way to make all mosquitoes disappear from the face of the Earth; a real big selling point in Wisconsin.

While all of this went on Murph fielded questions from bank customers, denied everything, and hurried home each evening to play catch-up in his lab. I felt obliged to help. He was obviously a hunted and very lonely man.

By then the lab had burgeoned into canary land. There were enough birds, and many of them strange, to fill an aviary. There was a giant hamster porking up through lack of exercise. Clarence occupied a perch,

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like a bird of prey, and shouted down other boy birds that started to sing. It was bedlam, and beyond. Clarence was becoming obnoxious.

Hamster Janders wasn't much better. When I tried to train him to leash he wasn't having any part of it. It took him exactly two seconds to chaw through the leash. He headed for Aunt Easy's garden where he grazed on all of the cabbage. Janders is no bigger than a great dane, but he isn't a whit smaller, either.

"I've created a monster," Murph confided, and he didn't mean Clarence, and he didn't mean Janders. "The bird seed bills are killin' me. I get no work time, what with cleaning cages."

"You'll think of something." But I didn't believe it. Instead I checked in with Uncle Willie.

By then June had turned to July and July to August. On a Sunday afternoon when lawns were fried brown and even the trees seemed to pant, Willie lay crumpled in a hammock sipping cream soda and reading Petronius. As I approached, so did Janice.

Janice looked at Willie's book. "In Wisconsin?"

"At my age it's the best I can do."

I have to admit that Janice looked pretty good. Her long hair kind of fluffed around her face, and her blue eyes did not look like members of any religious sect. They looked downright ornery.

"I'm taking one last shot," she told Willie, "and if it doesn't work I head for a job in the big city."

She didn't look like someone ready to take a last shot. She dressed casual, in slacks, and no cleavage.

"Seduction doesn't work," she told Willie. She turned to me. "Take a lesson." She turned back to Willie. "I've set it up. I got enough success-rumors running to promote investment. I can put together a Murph corporation that gets him loose from the bank."

For some stupid reason my heart sank. If Murph was a success, and risk capital built him a real lab, and if he could hire real lab assistants....

"Don't do it," Willie told Janice. "Worst thing in the world."

"For why?"

"Ah, youth." Willie rocked gently in his hammock. "Take up the violin. Write poems. Inscribe the story of your life in pictographs. Study

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astronomy." He scratched himself behind one ear and blinked upward at tired leaves of an oak tree. The tree sort of rustled.

"Science and art have lots in common," Willie told her. "Scientists and artists expect to fail. They know they're gonna fail. Our boy Murph is a little of both."

"This better be about something." Janice looked toward the house, where, in the basement, Murph cleaned canary cages and whispered cuss words.

"Because they go for the big picture," Willie explained. "They go for a grand statement and only end up, with maybe, something like the Mona Lisa. Great, a little grand, but not the big one." Willie also looked toward the house. "Scientists the same...put together the theory of relativity, then spend fifty years trying to dope out what it means."

"You're talking about success," I told him, not a little sarcastic. "No wonder you're confused...all those books...."

"And when they don't even get a Mona Lisa, or relativity, they crash in flames." Willie reached over and patted Janice's hand. The pat was grandfatherly, teacherly, and he looked like everybody's papa. "History is filled with great men who fail, stare at the cold idol they pursued, the idol with dead eyes, and end up weeping while kneeling before a woman and clasping her knees. Great women generally just fall into the arms of a man. You want love? Court failure."

"Gotcha." Janice looked ambitious.

"You court it by doing nothing," Willie told her. "Right now Murph is sure-fail. Don't disturb the balance." To me he said, "Stay out of it. Study basketball or candle making. Adopt a cat. Learn to play harmonica." But, he grinned when he said it.

If failure was what Janice needed, then success would block it.

"Garage sale," I told Murph. "Sell canaries. Sell cages and toss in a canary. Start a canary society. Sell memberships. I'll handle the whole deal."

I printed a sign for the front lawn. We sold three canaries, with cages, for a tenth the cost of the cages. I thought my idea had gone west, failed, flopped; I searched for a new idea. Before I came up with anything, we hit big.

Of the canaries we sold, one turned out scandalous. A preacher's wife

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bought him and waited for him to sing. Instead, he started to cuss...real stinky little mouth...something in the genes, something about Murph installing a dash of parrot. Murph got a little overboard on that one.

The preacher's wife sat cage and bird outdoors while she opened windows to air the house. She even washed the walls. When a mildly inebriated Swedish person passed down the alley, she sold him the bird and made ten bucks on the deal. The Swedish person took the bird to the town's only tavern where, even today, it charms the customers. Very popular, that bird. Name of Oscar.

Word got out that Murph's canaries were sleepers. We sold out, except for a breeding pair, Jimmy and Cleopatra. Jimmy has a tuft of feathers on top of his head and a confused look. Cleo lives up to her name.

The lab returned to normal. One oversize hamster, one oversize bird, plus white mice and other varmints.

"Don't do that again," I told Murph. I might as well have been whispering in a hurricane. He was already looking dreamy.

"County fair," he muttered. "I can regain my reputation. Blue ribbons. Yes, indeed."

I could sense that failure was once more in the wind, but felt helpless.

"What do girls do," I asked Aunt Easy, "when guys don't listen?"

She smiled and looked around a happy kitchen where Canary Sylvester sang. Aunt Easy motioned toward the living room where Uncle Willie diddled with a radio. "Ignore them," Aunt Easy told me, "but stand by to pick up the pieces when they crash." She smiled, even happier, and anyone could tell she was actually fond of Willie. "The dears have to be good at something. At crashing they are experts."

"Even Uncle Willie?" I was astounded.

"Especially Uncle Willie." Aunt Easy looked both sweet and tender. "He spent twenty years researching and writing a history of Wisconsin. When the book was published he was blacklisted by the State Historical Society."

"Because Uncle Willie lied?"

"No, dear, because he told the truth...." Aunt Easy is such a nice lady. She looked at me with real concern. "You're growing up. You'll soon have a birthday. And, oh Lordy, I'm afraid you have talent."

Yeah, well, talent for getting into messes.

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Autumn covered the land and Murph's crash, plus the big Janice victory, happened at the county fair. On a day of changing leaves, but with lots of sun, Murph sat Clarence on the front seat of Maytag and put Janders in the rear. About the best you can say is the two critters put up with each other. There were accusations but no fights.

Autumn lay across the land. Oak leaves were going brown, the last cut of hay was in, and the farm implement dealer displayed snowmobiles. Birds were flying south, churches held "harvest home" services, and the Ladies Aid quietly bragged of canned beans, canned corn, cherry preserves, and freezers stuffed with beef. Wood piles rose high as chainsaws roared, and chimneys were cleaned. Yet, in the middle of all this wholesomeness dwelt something rancid.

That rancidity came from the Fin, Fur, and Feathers Division of the Brotherhood of Exalted Beagles. That elite division of gun-toters was known, far and wide, as the best justification for the existence of the Temperance Union. The Beagles were generally a red-nosed lot, often glassy-eyed.

When Murph arrived at the midway a Ferris wheel twirled, and kids yelped as they rode a baby roller coaster. Rides and booths lined the midway; pop a balloon, win a stuffed skunk. Colorful streamers flew above the booths of boat dealers, feed and implement dealers, car dealers, and a make-believe Indian selling patent medicine. Popcorn lay underfoot, a calliope clanged, cotton candy smeared cheerful faces; but then, of course, there was also the booth hosted by the Exalted Order of Beagles: the Fin, Fur, and Feather Division.

These are the guys with rifle racks in their pickups, Jim Beam in the glove compartment, combat fatigues, tattoos reading "Poopsie" or "Mama," plus an occasional swastika. Their booth was just short of a full-fledged gunshow. The only thing missing was ammo. These guys know each other well enough not to trust their buddies with weapons that work.

So, here comes Murph, red-haired, smiling wide as a cornfield and just as corny, towing two cages on wheels and heading for the livestock show. Hamster Janders, overweight and with an attitude, is banging the side of his cage. Clarence sits silent, checking out the action, but with a gleam in his eye that should have been a warning.

Fin, Fur, and Feathers were standing in a group before their booth

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pretending they knew something. As Murph's little caravan passed, one of them worked his mouth real hard, tried to think, and was finally able to form words. "Hey, Murph." It was a real victory.

Murph stopped. Fin, Fur, and Feathers gathered around his cages. They regarded Janders.

"Ought to dress out at around two hundred. Be purty gamey."

"...ever fried up any of these?"

"Reminds me of my first wife. Looks like her, a little."

You could tell that Janders's attitude was getting even worse.

Fin, Fur, and Feathers looked at Clarence.

"This is the steeple-pooper."

"Got to admit, he looks purty tasty." A Fin, Fur, and Feathers guy stuck a finger into the cage. Clarence pecked it. The Fin, Fur, and Feathers backed up yelping. He still had a finger, but barely. He choked back a sob.

"We got shotguns for guys like you," he whispered, and no one, including him, knew whether he talked to Clarence or Murph.

"I'll be going," Murph murmured.

"Nope," the Fin, Fur, and Feathers guy said. "You'll be staying until I wring a neck." He reached to open the cage.

"Better not," Murph said.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Murph said.

"Oh, well," Murph said.

Clarence came out of the cage singing. The Fin, Fur, and Feathers guy tumbled on his fanny, hollering. The rest of Fin, Fur, and Feathers stood with mouths open as they watched Clarence become a disappearing yellow spot in the blue sky. Clarence sang anthems as he cruised, and he would sing them again when he returned.

Meanwhile, though, all heck broke loose on the midway because another guy had opened Janders's cage, and Janders was primed. He lumbered down the midway, stopped at the first hamburger stand he found, ran everybody out and ignored all the hamburger. He grazed the lettuce, scorned the pickles, and moved on to the next stand. He clicked his teeth as he worked, and if you've ever seen a hamster's teeth...well, imagine a pair of scissors big enough to snip through a bale of hay.

By the time the sheriff arrived Janders had mopped up every piece of lettuce, carrot, spinach salad, and okra on the midway. He had cruised the

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Homemaker's tent, licked up a few preserves, threatened the President of Ladies Aid, snarled at Murph's attempts to lasso him, sniffed the rear end of the Temperance Union's president as she fled past, and chewed the tassles off the Methodist preacher's shoes. Janders then raised his snout to the wind, picked up the scent of a distant cabbage patch, and his bottom was last seen charging over the horizon like a brown and hairy sunset.

The sheriff has a sense of humor. In this town you gotta. He drew Murph aside. They talked about payment for lettuce, general damages, and where, by all that is holy, did that blamed bird go?

"I'm afraid," Murph admitted, "that he'll return."

The sheriff looked along the midway, looked at tumult and confusion. "...Temperance Union lady got her bottom sniffed. Maybe protective custody?"

"I'll tough it out," Murph said. He looked toward the sky. "Oh, Lordy," Murph said.

Imagine, if you will, a massive V of Canadian geese, a V filling the sky from east to west. Imagine the honking of a thousand geese. And high above the honking, the celebrating song of a giant baritone canary calling the shots.

Imagine, if you will, a midway in total confusion as children flee screaming and adults stand stunned before a sight that nobody, nowhere has ever dreamed. Nightmares are made of such sights, at least the really bad ones.

Imagine, if you will, dive-bomber geese descending on the booth of Fin, Fur, and Feathers. Imagine a gray and green rain so constant that the fastest windshield wipers in the world could not keep up. Imagine men in combat fatigues huddled in a collapsing tent beneath waves of shimmering gray and green slurry, while high above, a baritone canary sings something out of George M. Cohen.

If you've imagined that, you've gotten hold of about ten percent of what was happening.

The bombardment lasted for something less than half an hour, after which Fin, Fur, and Feathers emerged from a mountain of gray and green, to see Clarence leading his V of geese south, migrating.

"I should have thought of that," Murph whispered. "It's the duck-gene influence. He's gone. My masterpiece." Murph sat, head in hands,

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while all around him people stood and whispered. The members of Fin, Fur, and Feathers were also migrating to the nearest lake.

People were confused. They had a sense of tragedy, but couldn't figure who or what was tragic. They looked at each other, looked for a preacher or a president to tell them what to think. They looked at Murph, slumped before a sagging Homemaker's tent as he tried not to weep.

They watched the bank president approach. The bank president is a dapper little man, always well dressed, always well groomed. "You're fired," the bank president said to Murph, although his voice was not unpleasant. "Business is business."

Murph slumped further. He stared at spilled popcorn, while noxious odors coasted on a breeze. He did not notice when Janice pushed through the crowd and took a seat beside him.

"We could emigrate until this blows over," she whispered. "Go to someplace new and crazy, like maybe Albuquerque."

"You'd go along?" Murph whispered.

"I expect," she said thoughtfully, "I'd better lead." She snuggled a little closer.

"Witchery," I muttered to me. "Pretty dumb," I told myself. Nobody answered.

The wedding took place in Oshkosh because there wasn't a single preacher in this town who dared to touch it. Uncle Willie, Aunt Easy, and I rode in Willie's '49 Studebaker. Janice and Murph piddled along in Maytag.

"There's not an epic here," Uncle Willie said to the Studebaker, or maybe himself, because he sure wasn't talking to me or Aunt Easy. "There are elements of epic, but somehow the darn thing is allegory. How best do we handle allegory?"

"Niagara Falls," Aunt Easy murmured. Then she explained that with Murph comfortably married, the Ladies Aid would leap to defend him. "If Murph and Janice can hold out for a month," Aunt Easy told me, "they can come home." Aunt Easy's eyes shone misty with romance.

The wedding didn't amount to much. "Do you take this woman, etc." "Yep." "Do you take this mad scientist, etc." "Yep." "You're married. Pay the cashier on your way out...."

Okay, so it was a good bit better than that. They had a real preacher

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and, unfortunately, Janice looked just smashing. Murph seemed a little less confused than usual. Before they left on the honeymoon Murph pulled me aside. "I'm worried about my critters," he whispered.

"Trust me," I told him. "In spite of everything, I have a good heart." Then I stood and watched Maytag towing old shoes and sprinkled with rice as it became a diminishing spot along the highway. That darned Janice waved a hanky just before Maytag disappeared over a low rise.

"It can be done in eight cantos," Uncle Willie muttered. "Or certainly no more than ten." He kept muttering all the way home. Aunt Easy sat beside him, but turned to me once in a while. She smiled and gave an occasional wink.

Matters were quiet for a couple days and then reports began to surface on the evening news. Janders was seen here, there, always grazing. When he was shot at a couple of times, he began feeding at night. In less than a week he had raided cabbage patches as far south as Peoria, only to be adopted by a nearsighted lady famous for collecting stray cats.

Other reports came from down around Redondo Beach where airline pilots reported a giant, buttercup-yellow bird sporting among clouds, and, apparently, singing. Pilots were amazed. They had never seen a bird who could outfly a crop duster. No one else paid much attention, because in California, stuff happens.

Our town has settled down as we coast toward winter. Uncle Willie spends his days in the quiet of the attic. Willie forgets to eat sometimes, and he talks to himself in iambs, and his silver hair frizzes, and Aunt Easy sometimes has to lead him in from the garden which apparently now grows symbols. Aunt Easy thinks he's cute.

And Aunt Easy is cute, herself. Now that she has shut out the Temperance Union, she takes a little white wine with supper. When she's not doing crosswords she does picture puzzles. She and Canary Sylvester hold down that warm kitchen, while she waits for Willie to crash.

And I sit in this lab surrounded by forty-seven white mice, fifteen white rats, a frowzy parrot, two exhausted rabbits who have been fulfilling their duty to their species; as I suppose Murph is fulfilling his. I oversee three guinea pigs, of whom one seems to be a good bit bigger than he oughta, plus Canary Jimmy, and Canary Cleopatra; and, oh, Lordy, Cleo has just laid an egg.

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And sweet sixteen has now become disillusioned seventeen. I think of Murph and Janice doing fulfillment, and wonder if all that householdy stuff is worth a snip, anyway. What I don't wonder is what I'm gonna do, because this is my senior year.

I'll graduate and then I'm just plain gone. The big city. I'll go to college, or become a poet, or a philosopher, or maybe a biologist; but two things are certain. I ain't gonna do it in no attic, and I ain't gonna do it here.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

OUR LEAD STORY in the July issue will take us to the planet Vlhan, where the native form of life, the Vlhani (also known as Buggies, Whipdancers, Spiders, or Marionettes), perform an annual ritual dance in which thousands die. Humans have started to participate in the dance, as you might recall if you read Adam-Troy Castro's first tale about these aliens a few years ago. In "The Tangled Strings of the Marionettes" we'll accompany a journalist in search of answers to the mysteries surrounding the dance.

Also on the docket for next month is "Wild Thing" by Charles Coleman Finlay, a new look at the Matter of Britain from a different perspective. And we'll have more of our usual columns, including Robert Killheffer's adventures in the world of Print on Demand publishing and perhaps some plumage from Pegasus.

In the months ahead we'll have more great fiction, including a journey to Mars compliments of Alex Irvine, a fantasy adventure by Pat Murphy, and Terry Bisson's new novelet "Almost Home," as well as stories by Gene Wolfe, Jerry Oltion, Joe Haldeman, and lots more. Keep that subscription up to date to make certain you won't miss any of the goodies in store.

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David Levine won the James White prize for his short story "Nucleon," which appeared in Interzone *magazine. Other stories of his have sold to the anthologies* Apprentice Fantastic, Beyond the Last Star, Imagination Fully Dilated Vol. 4, Writers of the Future, *and the forthcoming* New Faces in Science Fiction. *A longtime fan and reader, he coedits the fanzine* Bento *with his wife, Kate Yule. You can find the fanzine online at www.BentoPress.com.*

If you're wondering, this story was not written with any foreknowledge of Barry Malzberg's essay, but the temptation of running it in the same issue proved irresistible.

The Tale of the Golden Eagle

By David D. Levine

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT A BIRD. A bird, a ship, a machine, a woman — she was all these things, and none, but first and fundamentally a bird.

It is also a story about a man — a gambler, a liar, and a cheat, but only for the best of reasons.

No doubt you know the famous *Portrait of Denali Eu*, also called *The Third Decision*, whose eyes have been described as "two pools of sadness iced over with determination." This is the story behind that painting.

It is a love story. It is a sad story. And it is true.

The story begins in a time before shiftspace, before Conner and Hua, even before the caster people. The beginning of the story lies in the time of the bird ships.

Before the bird ships, just to go from one star to another, people either had to give up their whole lives and hope their children's children would remember why they had come, or freeze themselves and hope they could be thawed at the other end. Then the man called Doctor Jay made a great

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and horrible discovery: he learned that a living mind could change the shape of space. He found a way to weld a human brain to the keel of a starship, in such a way that the ship could travel from star to star in months instead of years.

After the execution of Doctor Jay, people learned that the part of the brain called the visual cortex was the key to changing the shape of space. And so they found a creature whose brain was almost all visual cortex, the *Aquila chrysaetos*, or as it was known in those days, the golden eagle. This was a bird that has been lost to us; it had wings broader than a tall man is tall, golden brown feathers long and light as a lover's touch, and eyes black and sharp as a clear winter night. But to the people of this time it was just another animal, and they did not appreciate it while they had it.

They took the egg of a golden eagle, and they hatched it in a warm box, and they let it fly and learn and grow, and then they killed it. And they took its brain and they placed it at the top of a cunning construction of plastic and silicon which gave it the intelligence of a human, and this they welded to the keel of the starship.

It may seem to you that it is as cruel to give a bird the intelligence of a human, only to enslave its brain, as it is to take the brain of a human and enslave that. And so it is. But the people of this time drew a rigid distinction between born-people and made-people, and to them this seemed only just and right.

Now it happens that one golden eagle brain, which was called Nerissa Zeebnen-Fearsig, was installed into a ship of surpassing beauty. It was a great broad shining arrowhead of silver metal, this ship, filigreed and inlaid with gold, and filled with clever and intricate mechanisms of subtle pleasure.

The ship traveled many thousands of light-years in the service of many captains. Love affairs and assassinations were planned and executed within its silver hull; it was used for a time as an emperor's private yacht; it even carried Magister Ai on part of his expedition to the Forgotten Worlds. But Nerissa the shipbrain saw none of these things, for she had been given eyes that saw only outward. She knew her masters only by the sound of their voices and the feel of their hands on her controls.

When the ship was under way, Nerissa felt the joy of flight, a pure unthinking joy she remembered from her time as a creature of muscle and

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feather. But most of her time was spent contemplating the silent stars or the wall of some dock, awaiting the whim of her owner and master.

Over the years the masters' voices changed. Cultured tones accustomed to command were replaced by harsher, more unforgiving voices, and the ship's rich appointments were removed one by one. In time even basic maintenance was postponed or disregarded, and Nerissa found herself more and more often in places of darkness and decay. She despaired, even feared for her life, but shipbrains had no rights. The strongest protest she was allowed was, "Sir and Master, that course of action may be inadvisable."

Finally the last and roughest owner, a man with grating voice and hard unsubtle hands, ran the ship into a docking probe in a foul decrepit port. The tarnished silver hull gave way, the air gushed out, and the man died, leaving a legacy so tattered and filthy that none could bear to touch it. Ownerless, airless, the hulk was towed to a wrecking yard and forgotten. Nerissa wept as the ship's power failed, her vision fading to monochrome and then to black. Reduced to the barest reserves of energy, she fell into a deep uneasy sleep.

While she slept the universe changed. Conner and Hua discovered shiftspace, and travel between planets became something the merely well-off could afford. The Clash of Cultures burst into full flower almost at once, as ten thousand faiths and religions and philosophies collided and mingled. It was a time of violence and strife, but in time a few ideas emerged as points of agreement, and one of these was that what had been done to the golden eagles was wrong. So the hatcheries were closed, the ships retired, and the shipbrains compassionately killed.

All save one. One that slept forgotten in a wrecking yard orbiting an ugly red star known only by a number.

The Clash of Cultures gradually drew to a close as points of agreement grew and coalesced, eventually giving birth to Consensus. But much knowledge was lost, and so when a king's tinker entered the wrecking yard and found the hulk of the great ship he had no idea what a unique treasure he had stumbled upon. He saw only the precious metal of the ship's hull, and it was for this metal he purchased it for his master.

As the ship was broken up, the tinker saved out a few of the most interesting-looking pieces for later use. One of these was the housing

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containing the sleeping brain of Nerissa Zeebnen-Fearsig. She felt a blinding pain as she was crudely torched from the ship's keel, and she feared her end had come at last, but then the pain receded and she slept once more.

Nerissa sat unconsidered for some years in one of the king's many storerooms, surrounded by a thousand other dismembered devices. But then came a day when the tinker entered the storeroom in search of some wire. He spotted a likely-looking length of wire beneath a pile of dusty components, but when he pulled on it he found himself with a peculiar rounded thing that piqued his curiosity. He took it back to his workbench, where he puzzled out its contacts and connectors, its inputs and outputs, and finally he connected an ancient scavenged power unit and Nerissa returned to awareness.

Waking was far more painful than being cut from the ship's hull. A torrent of discordant colors and textures flooded her senses, but her screams went unheard for the tinker had not connected her voice. Instead, a series of meaningless numbers and letters stepped delicately onto a small display plate. The tinker was fascinated by this, and stayed up all that night, probing and prodding, trying to understand just what manner of machine he had found.

Nerissa was nearly driven mad by the pain and the random sensations, and it was nothing but good fortune that when the tinker happened to hook up a voice unit to the proper outputs she was praying aloud for relief rather than crying incoherently — praying in Nihon, already an ancient language at the time of the bird ships, but still understood in the tinker's time as it is today. He dropped his soldering iron in astonishment.

Soon the tinker found Nerissa an eye and an ear and disconnected the probes that caused her the worst of the pain. They talked all that day, and he listened with apparent fascination to her description of her creation and her tales of her travels; for the first time in many centuries Nerissa allowed herself to hope. But though he professed to believe her, privately he concluded she was merely a machine: a storytelling machine constructed to believe its own fictions. For he was not an educated man, and as he had worked with machines every day of his life he was unable to conceive that she might be anything else.

Though he thought Nerissa was a machine, he recognized her

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intelligence and charm and decided to present her to his king as a special gift. He called together his apprentices and artisans and together they built a suitable container for her, a humanoid body of the finest and most costly materials. Her structural elements were composite diamond fiber, stronger than her old hull; her skin and hair were pure platinum, glowing with a subtle color deeper and finer than silver; her eyes and her teeth were beryl and opal; and all was assembled with the greatest of care and attention such that it moved as smoothly as any living thing.

The one thing he did not do was to provide the body with any semblance of sexual organs. It may seem to you that this omission is callous and arbitrary, and so it is. But the people of this time thought such a thing would be unseemly.

When the body was finished, Nerissa's brain in its housing was placed gently in its chest and the many connections were made with great care and delicacy. Power was applied then, and Nerissa's beautiful body of precious metals convulsed and twisted, her back arching and a horrible keening wail tearing from her amber lips. She begged to be deactivated, but the tinker and his assistants probed and prodded, tweaked and adjusted, and gradually the pain ebbed away, leaving Nerissa trembling on its shore.

The king was genuinely delighted with the tinker's gift of "a storytelling machine, built from bits and pieces found here and there." The tinker had warned him that Nerissa seemed to believe her own tales, and so he pretended to believe them too, but Nerissa knew when she was being humored. So she gave him made-up stories, as he expected, though most of them had a kernel of truth drawn from her own life.

Now this king was a kind and wise man, truly appreciative of Nerissa, but he had many political problems and many enemies, so he rarely found time for her stories. After some months he found the sight of her, waiting patiently in his apartments, raised a pang of guilt that overwhelmed his joy at her beauty and grace. So he decided to gift Nerissa to an influential duke. In this way he hoped to put the man in his debt, to broaden the reputation of his tinker, and perhaps to gain Nerissa a more appreciative audience.

So Nerissa joined the household of Duke Vey, in the city of Arica. The king's plan met with great success; the duke, well pleased with the king's gift, spent many hours parading Nerissa before his friends and relations.

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All were suitably impressed by her stories, her charm, and her gleaming beauty, and the king's tinker received many fine commissions from those who had seen her.

One of those who saw her was Denali Eu.

The son and heir of the famous trader Ranson Eu, Denali appeared but rarely in Arica. When he did visit the city he attended all the finest soirees, displaying his subtle wit and radiant wardrobe, and gambled flamboyantly. All agreed he shared his late father's gambling skill, though lacking his extravagance and bravado. Of his travels, however, he let fall only the vaguest of hints. He liked to say his business dealings were like leri fruits, sensitive to the harsh light of day.

In fact, Ranson Eu had gambled away his fortune, leaving his wife and only child shackled to a mountainous debt. Denali Eu had no ship, no travels, no servants. His time away from Arica was spent in a small and shabby house not far from town, the family's last bit of property, where he and his mother Leona survived on hunting and a small vegetable garden. In the evenings they sewed Denali's outfits for the next expedition to Arica, using refurbished and rearranged pieces from previous seasons. It is a tribute to Leona Eu's talent and taste that Denali was often perceived as a fashion leader.

It pained Denali to maintain this fiction. But he had no alternative, for as long as he was perceived as a prosperous trader his father's creditors were content to circle far from the fire and dine on scraps. His social status also gave him access to useful information, which could sometimes be sold for cash, and gave him entree to high-stakes gambling venues. Ranson Eu had, in fact, been an excellent gambler when sober, and had passed both acumen and techniques on to his son. Denali often wished he could have returned the favor by passing his caution and temperance on to his father.

It was across a spinning gambling wheel that Denali Eu first saw Nerissa Zeebnen-Fearsig. The lamplight glanced off her silver metal shoulder as a cat rubs against a leg, leaving both charged with electricity. Her unclothed body revealed every bit of the expense and quality of her manufacture. She stood with head tilted upward, her amber lips gently parted as she spoke to the taller Duke Vey beside her.

"Who is that?" asked Denali Eu to the woman beside him as he gathered his winnings.

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"It is the duke's storytelling machine. Have you not seen it before?"

"No...no, I have not. She's beautiful. She must be worth millions."

"It's priceless. It was a present from the king."

At that moment Eu made the first of three decisions that shaped the rest of his life and set a legend in motion: he determined to win Nerissa from the duke in a game of senec.

Denali Eu was a keen observer of people, as he had to be given his situation, and he had often found himself seated across a senec table from Duke Vey. The duke, like many senec players, had a mathematical system for playing the game. It was a good system; in fact, Eu had to concede it was better than his own...most of the time. For he had noticed a flaw in the system's logic. He had husbanded this knowledge for many months; he knew that once he had exploited the flaw the duke would not fall into the same trap a second time.

Here was the opportunity he had been waiting for. The machine's platinum and jewels alone might fetch enough to retire his father's debt, even at the price (far below their actual value) he could obtain on the black market. It would be a shame to break up such a fine creation, but he could never sell her entire; to do so would attract far too much attention to the Eu family's affairs.

It was two weeks before Denali Eu was able to engineer a game of no-limit senec with the duke, and when he sat down at the table Denali's nerves were already keening with tension. He usually kept his visits to a week, and despite his best efforts he thought some were beginning to suspect he had only two suits of clothing to his name.

Denali knew the duke would not be easily trapped. As he played he extended himself much farther than he usually did, risked much more than he normally would, to engage the duke's attention. His smile grew forced, and trickles of perspiration ran down his sides; he had to restrain himself from nervously tapping his cards against his sweating glass of leri water.

Eyebrows were raised around the table. One of the other players muttered "seems he has a touch of the old man in him after all" behind his cards. Again and again Denali raised the stakes, pushing his system to its own limits. Repeatedly he seized control of the dealer's token, the surest way to maintain his lead but the greatest risk in case of a forfeit. And

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forfeit he did, not just once but twice, for even the best system must occasionally fail in the face of an improbable run of bad cards. But through aggressive play he beat back from his losses, bankrupting one player after another. And always he kept a weather eye for the run of staves he needed to exploit the flaw in the duke's system.

Finally only Denali Eu and Duke Vey remained, the reflected light from the maroon felt of the senec table turning both their faces into demon masks. The other players watched from the surrounding darkness, most of their stakes now in Denali's possession. He could walk away from the table right now and it would be his most profitable trip since his father's death.

"One last hand," he said, placing his ante, "before we retire? A hand of Dragons' Delight, perhaps?"

"Very well," replied the duke, matching the ante.

Dragons' Delight was a fiendishly complicated form of senec, with round after round of betting and many opportunities for forfeit. Denali trembled beneath his cape as he raised and raised, trying to pull as much money as possible from the duke's hand, but not so much that he would be tempted to fold.

The seven of staves came out, and Denali raised his bet. The duke matched him. Then the prince of staves snapped onto the table. He raised again, substantially, and the duke raised him back. He matched, then dealt another card.

It was the courtesan of staves.

Their eyes met over the red-glowing table, the little pile of colorful cards, the heaps of betting counters. Denali knew the duke's system predicted an end to the run after three staves: a win for the duke. His own system said the odds of a fourth stave at this point, yielding a win for him, were better than eighty percent.

Denali gathered his hand of cards into a tight little bundle, tapped it against the table to square it, laid it carefully on the felt before him. He placed his hands, fingers spread, on either side of the stack for a moment. Then he reached to his left and shoved a huge pile of counters to the middle of the table. It was far more than the duke could match.

The duke placed his cards flat on the table. "It seems I must fold."

"So it seems. Or...you could wager some personal property."

"I think I know what you have in mind."

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"Yes. The storytelling machine."

"I'm sorry. That is worth far more than...."

Denali pushed all the rest of his counters forward.

The duke stared levelly into Denali's eyes. Denali stared back a challenge: How much do you trust your system?

The duke dropped his eyes to his cards. Studied them hard for a moment, then looked back. "Very well. I wager the storytelling machine." A ripple of sound ran through the observers. "But I'm afraid that must be considered a raise. What can you offer to match it?"

Denali's heart shrank to a cold hard clinker at the center of his chest. He must match the raise, or fold. "I wager my ship." A man in the crowd gasped audibly.

Denali's ship, the *Crocus*, which had been his father's, was nothing but a worthless hull rusting behind his mother's house. The drive and other fittings had gone to a money lender from Gaspara. If he lost, his deception would be exposed and he would be sold into slavery to pay his father's debts.

"I accept that as a match," said the duke.

Denali stared at the back of the top card of the deck. If it was a stave, he won. Else, he lost. The little boy on the card's back design stared back at him. He could not meet that printed gaze, and dropped his eyes.

His eye lit upon one single counter that had been left by accident on the table before him, and a mad impulse seized him. He placed his index finger upon that counter, slid it across the felt to join the rest.

"I raise by one."

Stunned silence from the observers.

The duke's eyes narrowed. Then widened. Then closed, as he placed his hand across them. He began to chuckle. Then he laughed out loud. He leaned back in his chair, roaring with laughter, and slapped his cards on the table before him. "You fiendish bastard!" he gasped out. "I fold!"

Pandemonium. Denali Eu and the Duke Vey stood, shook hands, then embraced each other. The duke trembled with laughter; Denali just trembled. Servants appeared to gather the counters and process the transfer of property.

Denali could not help himself. He turned over the top card.

It was the five of berries.

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* * *

The next morning Denali Eu came to the duke's city house, his bag slung over his shoulder. He found Nerissa waiting in the entry hall, alone except for two guards. "The duke sends his regrets," said one, "but after last night's entertainment he finds himself indisposed to company."

Denali and the guards signed papers acknowledging the transfer of Nerissa to his possession, and he turned to leave, gesturing for her to follow. But as the door opened for them, a ray of morning sunlight touched her body and sent shimmering reflections into all the corners of the room. Denali turned back and was startled by her brilliant beauty.

"You're naked," he blurted out, and immediately felt foolish.

"Sir and Master, I am as I was made," she replied.

"I myself was born naked, but that does not excuse nudity in polite society. Here." He removed his cape and placed it over her shoulders. It was sufficient for propriety. Then, unsure of the proper term of address for a machine, he silently proffered his elbow. She took it, and the two of them walked out the door side by side.

"What shall I call you?" he said as they strolled up toward the docks. Her feet chimed on the hard pathway.

"My name is Nerissa Zeebnen-Fearsig, Sir and Master."

"Yes, but have you any title?"

"No, Sir and Master."

"Your name is a trifle...ungainly. I shall address you as M'zelle." It was a standard term of address for a younger woman, or one of lower status. None of her other owners had ever called her anything of the sort.

"As you wish, Sir and Master."

"You may address me simply as Sir," he said. The repeated use of his full and proper title made Denali uncomfortable, for he was keenly aware of just how close he was to slavery himself. He was all the more discomfited by Nerissa's inhuman beauty and poise. Walking beside her, he felt himself little more than a bag of meat and hair. Worse, he knew that soon he would have to destroy this marvelous machine, though his mind kept trying to escape that fact. "In fact, you need not use the Sir on every statement. M'zelle." And he inclined his head.

"Yes, Sir and Ma.... Yes, Sir.... Oh, goodness." Though her face had only a few movements to it, her confusion and embarrassment were clear

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from the set of her tourmaline eyebrows and amber lips. "I mean, yes. Just yes."

"Just so," he said, and he laughed.

Nerissa was unsure what to think of this man, whose clothing and bearing indicated great wealth but whose attitude toward her was deferential. She had sometimes seen fear, from unsophisticated or unlettered people, but this was something else. It was as though she held a measure of power over him.

Then she realized what it was she saw in Denali Eu's eyes. It was something she had never before seen directed toward herself.

It was respect.

They reached the docks, a confusion of utilitarian buildings at the top of a hill just outside of town. This was where the shiftspace ships made landfall. "Here we are, M'zelle," he said, and gestured her into a docking shed like all the rest.

It was empty.

"I do not understand, Sir."

He looked at the floor. His original plan had been to deactivate her at this point. But as they had walked together from town, he had come to understand just how heavy she was. There was no way he could smuggle her to his mother's house unassisted, and nobody other than Nerissa herself who could be trusted to assist.

He puffed out his cheeks, not raising his head. "The reason this shed is empty is that I have no ship. We will wait here until after dark, and then we will walk to my home, which is not far from here."

"You have no ship, Sir?"

"No." He turned and took her hands in his. They were warm, and hummed faintly. The fingernails were chips of ruby. He still did not meet her eyes. "No, M'zelle, I have no ship. In fact, I am afraid *you* are my sole possession of any value." Finally he looked up, his eyes pleading. "I must ask that you keep my secret safe."

Nerissa's heart went out to him then. "I am honored by your trust, Sir."

"Thank you, M'zelle." He led her to a small office, where there was a cot and a chair and a small stasis cupboard. "This is my waiting room. Can I offer you something to drink? Oh."

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His expression of embarrassment was charming. "No, thank you," she said.

"But please...do take a seat."

"I do not tire, Sir."

"Please, M'zelle. I insist. I could not bear to see you stand while I sit, and I do tire and must sit eventually."

"Very well, Sir," she said. The chair creaked beneath her weight, but held.

Denali poured himself a glass of cool water from the cupboard, then sat on the edge of the cot. "Usually I pass the time until dark reading, but since I am now the owner of a fine storytelling machine, it would seem impolite not to make use of your services. Would you please tell me a story?"

"Certainly, Sir. What kind of story would you like to hear?"

"Tell me a story about...yourself."

A thrill went through her then. "Would you like a true story, or a made-up one?"

"True stories are always more interesting."

And so Nerissa told him a story about a golden eagle who lived for many years as the brain of a bird ship, then slept for a long time and finally became a storytelling machine. She did not embellish — the story was fantastic enough as it was — and she did not leave out the sad parts or the embarrassing parts.

When she finished, it was full dark. The glass of water sat, untouched, on the dusty floor beside Denali's cot.

Unlike the tinker, Denali Eu was an educated man. He knew the history of the bird ships, and he understood just what Nerissa was and what she was capable of. He had inherited his father's notes, his contacts, and his trading expertise along with his debts. He knew in his bones that with a bird ship he could not just repay those debts, but rebuild his family's wealth and reputation.

It was then that he made the second of the three decisions that set a legend in motion: he would find a way to refurbish the hull of *Crocus* and refit it as a bird ship.

But all he said to Nerissa was "Thank you for the story, M'zelle." He knew his new plan was nearly as cruel as the old, because it would still mean the end of her existence as a gleaming almost-person. *But at least*

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she will still be alive, he told himself. *You have the right to do this. She is your property. You owe it to your mother and to your father's memory.*

Still he felt filthy.

Denali dressed Nerissa in a spare suit of his traveling clothes, with gloves and a large floppy hat to hide her platinum skin, and they walked to his mother's house by the light of the moons. They talked as they walked, he of his life and she of hers. Both asked questions; both listened attentively to the answers. They learned about each other and they grew closer. If Nerissa sensed Denali was holding something back, she was not unduly concerned; she had already received far more confidences from him than she could ever have expected.

The house of Leona Eu had been hers before her marriage to Ranson Eu. It was small and patched, but warm and tasteful and genuine. Nerissa had never seen such a place; she loved it immediately.

Denali introduced Nerissa to his mother and explained that he had won Nerissa at gambling. Later, in private, he told his mother he planned to sell Nerissa on his next trip to Arica, but did not want the storyteller to know this because she would feel unwanted.

The life of the household returned to something like its usual routine, and Nerissa did her best to contribute. She proved to be a tireless gardener (her delicate finger joints protected from the dirt by leather gloves), and her ability to sit completely motionless for hours made her an impressive hunter. Nerissa was soon accepted as part of the family. This was something she had never experienced before, and she was honored and delighted. In the evenings, they all entertained each other with stories.

After Leona and Nerissa had gone to bed (for though her body never wearied, Nerissa's brain still required sleep), Denali stayed up late for many nights. He researched the bird ships and hauled out the old plans of *Crocus,* then drew new plans. The refitted ship would be stronger in the keel and lighter in weight; less luxurious, but with more lifesystem and cargo capacity. He sent both sets of plans to his father's chandler. The reply arrived in a few days: the chandler would do the work, though he said the design seemed insane.

The price he quoted was high. But the money Denali had won from the Duke would cover the down payment, and the balance was less than Nerissa's empty body would bring on the black market.

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The next week the chandler came by with his delivery dirigible. He hooked chains and cables to *Crocus*'s corroded hull and hauled it away. Denali emptied out his secret personal cache of money and told Leona it was the proceeds of the salvage sale.

"I thought we had sold every part worth salvaging long ago," she said. "Surely the expense of the dirigible was more than the hull was worth?"

"I met the chandler on my last trip to Arica, and persuaded him he owed us a favor."

Leona still seemed unconvinced, but she accepted the money.

In the following weeks Nerissa's sense that Denali was hiding something from her increased. He grew haggard, and she found he would not meet her eyes. She wanted to ask him about his troubles, to repay the concern and respect she had been shown. But her years of servitude had ingrained in her a pattern of silent obedience and she said nothing.

For his part, Denali felt an agony of silence. He could confide neither in his mother, who would berate him for hiring the chandler with money he did not yet have, nor in Nerissa, whose beauty he planned to tear away and sell for his own profit; yet he ached for reassurance. He found himself uninterested in food, and spent long hours of the night staring at his ceiling, unable to sleep.

On one such restless night, he watched a patch of shimmering moonlight, reflected onto his ceiling from a small pond near the house, as it passed slowly from one side of the room to the other. Suddenly, silently, it flared and danced all over the room, then returned to its previous state. Just as he was about to dismiss the phenomenon as an effect of his tired eyes, it happened again. And a third time.

He rose from his bed and looked out the window. What he saw then captured his heart. It was Nerissa, dancing naked on the shore of the pond. He had seen the moonlight reflected from her shining metal body.

Nerissa's dance was a soaring, graceful thing, a poem composed of twirls and leaps and tumbles. The great strength of her legs propelled her high into the air, in defiance of her metallic weight, and brought her to landing as delicately as a faun. Her platinum skin in the moonlight shone silver on silver, black on black; she was a creature of the moonlight, a pirouetting dancing fragment of the night.

She was even more beautiful than he had thought.

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His heart was torn in two. Part of it wanted to fly, to leap and dance with her in the night. Part of it sank to the acid pit of his stomach, as though trying to hide from the knowledge of the plan he had laid. How could he destroy this beauty and grace for mere money? But how could he sentence himself, his mother, and his father's memory to a continued life of debt and deceit — a life that must eventually end in discovery and shame — for the sake of a machine?

Perhaps he let out a small sound of despair. Perhaps it was the sight of his white nightshirt in the window. For whatever reason, Nerissa noticed she was being watched. Clumsily she stopped her dance and stared directly at him, her eyes two tiny stars of reflected light.

He descended the stairs and met her in the doorway. The moonlight shining from her cheek was painfully bright, and in the silence of the night he heard the tiny sounds of her eyes as they shifted in their sockets.

"I'm sorry I disturbed your sleep, Sir."

"No, no...I wasn't asleep. You dance beautifully, M'zelle."

"Thank you, Sir. I do enjoy it. It is as close as I can come in this body to the joy of flight between the stars."

The sundered halves of Denali's heart fused together then, for he realized then his plan for Nerissa was exactly what she wanted as well. He would restore her to her former life of sailing the currents of space, which she had described so vividly to him, and at the same time restore his own fortune.

Nerissa saw the smile spreading across his face, and asked what he was thinking.

"I have just thought of the most delightful surprise for you, M'zelle. A gift for you, to express my appreciation of your dance. But it will take some time to prepare, so I must ask you to be patient." He bent and kissed the warm metal of her fingers. "Good night, M'zelle."

"Good night, Sir."

He returned to his bed and fell immediately into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Three days later the chandler's dirigible returned, the refitted *Crocus* hanging from its gondola. The ship's gleaming hull wore vivid stripes of red, yellow, and green, the colors of Ranson Eu's former trading company. Denali, Leona, and Nerissa gathered together and watched as the dirigible

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lowered it gently to the ground. The pilot waved from the gondola as he flew away.

"This is my surprise to you both," Denali proclaimed. "Behold: *Crocus* is reborn!"

Nerissa stared at the ship in silent rapture, but Leona turned to her son with concern. "I suspected you were hiding something from me. This is a wonderful surprise, to be sure, but I thought we had no secrets from each other."

"Only this one, Mother. And there was a reason. Nerissa, here is my gift to you: this new *Crocus* has been built especially for you. In this new bird ship you will fly the stars once more."

Nerissa's reaction confused and disturbed him. She went rigid, her features drawing together and her eyes widening. "This is...a bird ship?" she said. "But where did you obtain the shipbrain?"

"There is no shipbrain, M'zelle. That position has been reserved for your own sweet self."

Nerissa's metal hands bunched into fists, held tightly against her chin. She seemed to shrink into herself. "No," she whispered. "No, no...please, Sir and Master...I beg you...."

Denali Eu felt his hands grow cold. "But M'zelle, when I saw you dance in the moonlight...I thought to fly the stars was your greatest joy."

"To fly is joy, yes...but to be cut from this body...to be severed... uprooted...the pain, Sir and Master...that pain is something I could never endure again." She crouched, trembling, on the stones of the path. Her eyes were huge. "I would rather die, Sir and Master. I would find a way, Sir and Master. Please, Sir and Master, please...I know you are my owner, I know I must obey your wishes without question or hesitation, but I beg you...do not ask me to do this." And she fell at his feet, her hands raised as though to ward off a blow.

All the color ran out of Denali Eu's world. He turned from Nerissa and Leona and marched clumsily into the woods behind the house. They did not follow.

Some time later he found himself seated on a fallen log. The sun was low in the sky and his clothes and skin were torn from thorns and brambles.

How could he have been so stupid? He had lied to his mother, lied to Nerissa, made unwarranted assumptions, and promised money he did not

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have. Soon the chandler's bill would arrive and he had nothing with which to pay it.

He considered his options. He could follow through with his plan — and Nerissa would find some way to end her life, or else would serve in unwilling misery. Even if he were heartless enough to force her to do this, he did not relish the idea of trusting his life to a ship he had betrayed.

He could break up Nerissa, sell her platinum and precious stones to pay the chandler — and she would be gone completely, and he would have only a worthless hull without a drive.

He could sell Nerissa in one piece — and it would be the same, only with more money. Nerissa would still be lost to him, and subject to the whim of some other master who might treat her still more cruelly.

He could repudiate the chandler's bill, declare bankruptcy — and see Nerissa sold off, along with his mother's house, and himself sold into slavery.

But there was one more option. Denali Eu was an educated man, and he knew the history of the bird ships. He also knew Nerissa's story. And because of this knowledge, and despite this knowledge, he made the final, fateful decision that set a legend in motion.

He spent a long time sitting on the log, his head in his hands, but he could think of no other alternative. Then he stood and walked back to his mother's house. There, as the sun set, he told Nerissa and Leona of his decision. His mother cried and shouted and beat her hands upon the kitchen table; Nerissa sat upon a chair with her head bowed, but did not speak. Neither of them could change his mind.

The next day Nerissa and Leona took Denali Eu for a walk in the forest. He listened to the birds and the rustling of the leaves, and he felt the cool wind brush gently against his skin. He smelled the green of the leaves and the damp of the earth, and as many flowers as they could find. In the evening they prepared for him a fine meal, with pungent spices and fresh vegetables, and succulent fruits new-gathered and sweet. Nerissa massaged his back with her strong warm fingers, and his mother cried as she brushed his cheek with pieces of silk and fur.

On the following morning he went into the city and gave himself to the doctors. He told them what he wanted, and he swore three times that this was his will.

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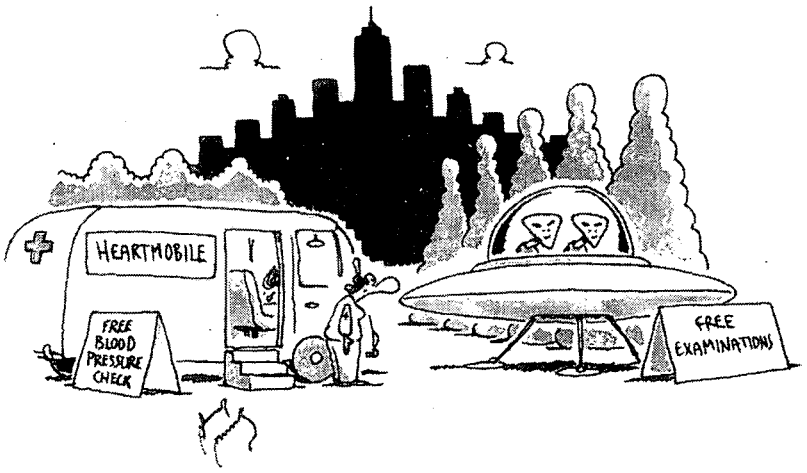
And so they killed him, and they took his brain and welded it to the keel of the *Crocus*. For the techniques of Doctor Jay were legal, as long as the donation was voluntary and sworn to three times, and the organs of a young man in the best of health could be sold for enough money to pacify the chandler.

The operation was every bit as painful as Nerissa had said. But Denali found sailing the stars was even more delightful than dancing in the moonlight: a symphony of colors and textures beyond his human experience. And this ship was equipped with eyes and ears and hands within its hull as well as without.

The ship, renamed the *Golden Eagle*, became a hugely successful trader. Denali Eu's knowledge and skill, combined with Nerissa Zeebnen-Fearsig's beauty and charm, were something no seller or buyer could resist and no other trader could surpass. The ship with a human mind and a metal captain was famed in song and story, and when after many years Leona Eu died she left one of the greatest fortunes in the Consensus.

Denali Eu and Nerissa the Silver Captain have not been seen for many, many years. Some say they sought new challenges in the Magellanic Clouds or even beyond. Some say they settled down to a contented existence on an obscure planet. But no one doubts that, wherever they are, they are together still.



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CURIOSITIES

THE SNOUTERS: FORM AND LIFE OF THE RHINOGRADES, BY DR. HARALD STÜMPKE (1967)

PROFESSOR Dr. Harald Stümpke had only sixteen years to study the odd little creatures that inhabited the island of Heidadeifi in the Hi-yi-yi archipelago before he, they, and their island home were destroyed by A-bomb tests in 1957. Sic transit Stümpke, sic transit...the snouters. Or so says 1967's *The Snouters: Form and Life of the Rhinogrades*, in an epilogue penned by taxonomist Gerolf Steiner.

Well, truth be told, Steiner had a lot more to do with it. In fact, he made the whole thing up. With the goal of teaching his students something about how animals evolve in isolation, he decided that he'd give them something to really sink their teeth into: an order of mammals that walked and/or leapt on their noses. Some snouters fly, others hop, still others fish or lie in wait for their prey — but all use their nasal apparatus (or, in some cases, apparati) to survive.

With great zeal he created a text that detailed the snouters and their physiognomy, habits, and reproductive cycles, the necessary minutiae of Darwinian lore; then sprinkled it liberally with sketches and illustrations, not to mention an equally fictitious bibliography, all of it taken from his own fertile (some might say febrile) imagination. He did it so well that the book has been reprinted, is still being used in colleges, and has spawned a sequel of sorts by biologist Charles C. Davis.

Any chance I can still sign up for the course, Dr. Stümpke?

— Bud Webster

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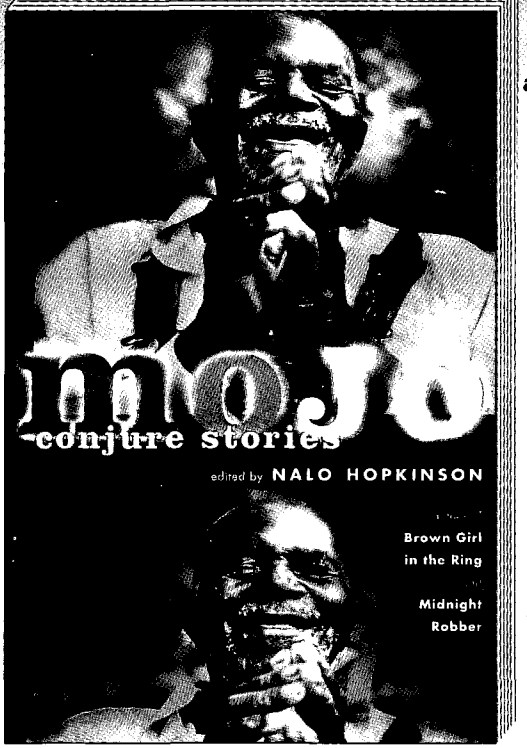

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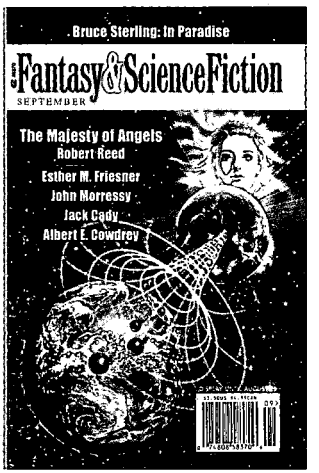

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